The New Criterion

April 1990

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

Notes & Comments, 1
T. S. Eliot & high culture: an exchange
Cynthia Ozick & Hilton Kramer, 5
Whittaker Chambers *by Sam Tanenhaus,* 11
Coleridge the poet *by Bruce Bawer,* 20
Opera & politics *by Samuel Lipman,* 33
Art & ideas in the Eighties *by Roger Kimball,* 38
"An academic story" *a poem by Louis Simpson,* 44

Art: Mixed media *by Jed Perl,* 49; **Music:** Why Levine? *by Dana Mack,* 56
Books: *Pietro Citati* Kafka *reviewed by John Simon,* 60; *Gary Taylor* Reinventing Shakespeare *reviewed by C. H. Sisson,* 66; *Abram Tertz (Andrei Sinyavsky)* Goodnight! *reviewed by Lauren Weiner,* 69; *Mordecai Richler* Solomon Gursky was here *reviewed by David Gurevich,* 72; **Letters,** 78

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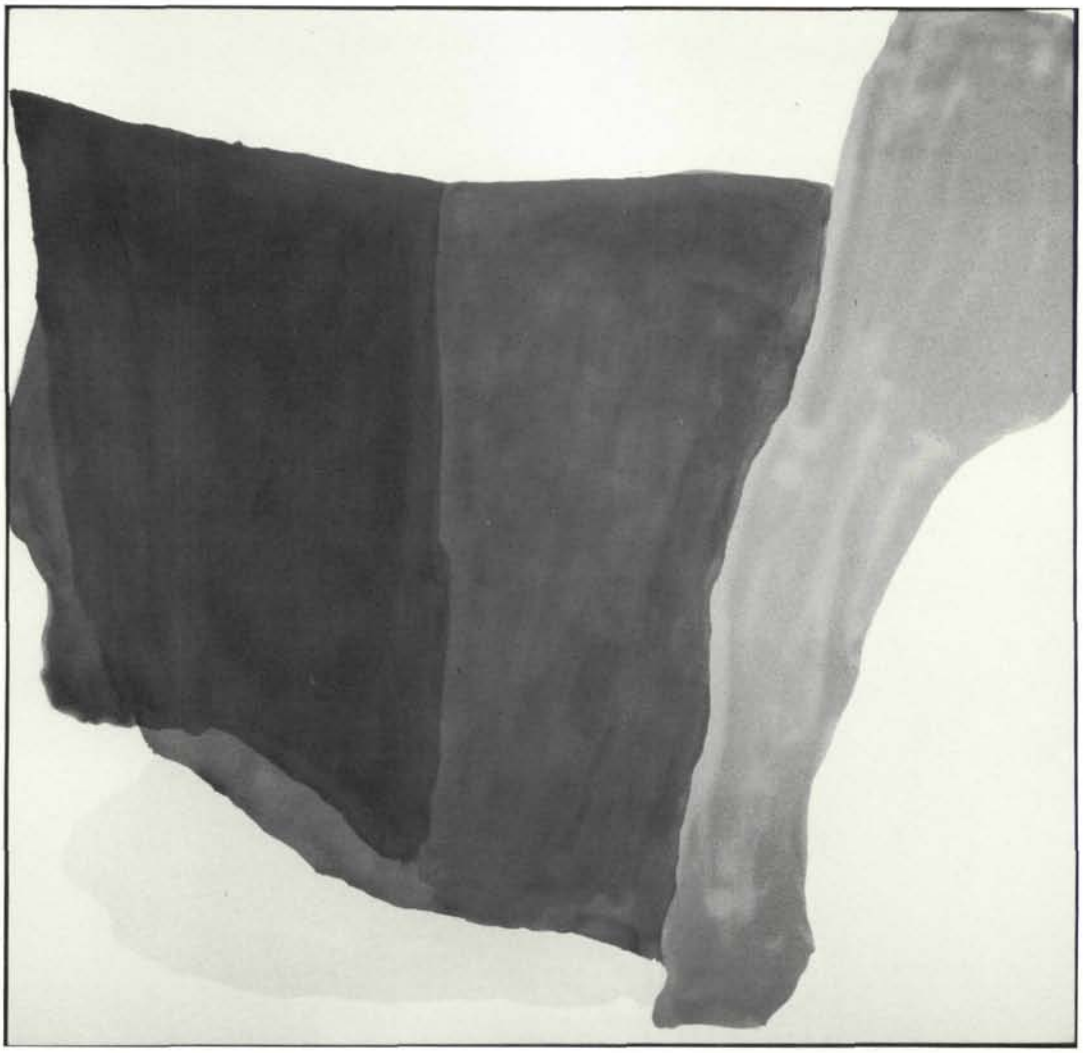

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Roger Kimball's book, *Tenured Radicals,* will be published this month by Harper & Row.

Samuel Lipman's new book, *Arguing for Music, Arguing for Culture,* will be published in June by David R. Godine.

Dana Mack wrote about the Kronos Quartet for our February issue.

Cynthia Ozick is the author of nine books, the latest of which are *Metaphor & Memory,* essays, and *The Shawl,* a story and a novella, both from Alfred A. Knopf.

Jed Perl is the author of *Paris Without End: On French Art Since World War I* (North Point Press).

John Simon's most recent collection of essays is *The Sheep from the Goats* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson).

Louis Simpson's *Collected Poems* and *Selected Prose* have been published by Paragon House.

C. H. Sisson's latest book is *On the Look-Out: A Partial Autobiography* (Carcanet).

Sam Tanenhaus is writing a biography of Whittaker Chambers, to be published by Random House.

Lauren Weiner reviewed two recent books about Caroline Gordon for our October issue.

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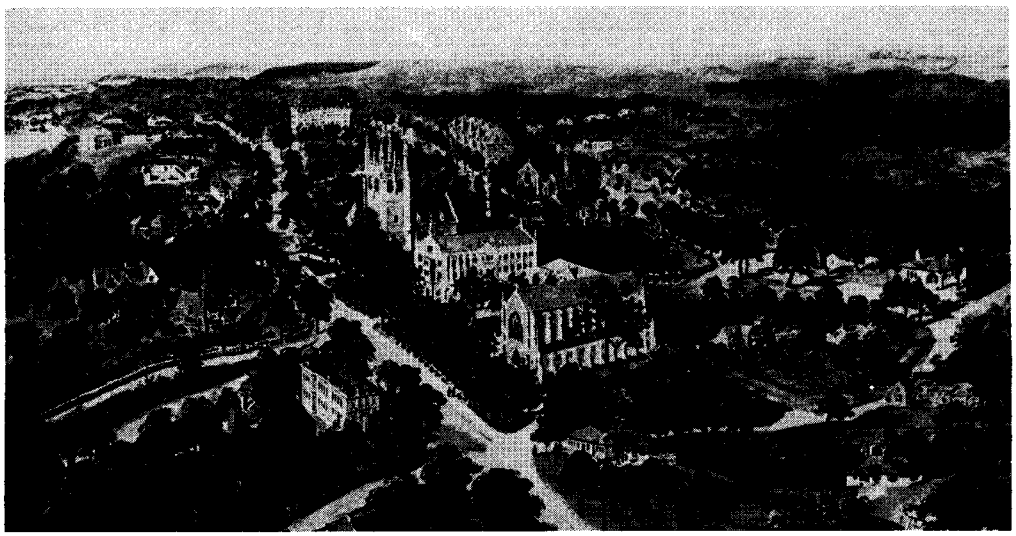

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Notes & Comments: April 1990

"Can Art History Survive Feminism?"

In February the Women's Caucus for Art, a nationwide organization of feminist artists, critics, art historians, teachers, and arts administrators, convened its 1990 national conference at the New York Hilton. Appropriately titled "Shifting Power," the well-attended three-day conference was held jointly with the annual meeting of the College Art Association, the most prominent academic organization of art historians in the country. It was, as everyone knew it would be, an event devoted primarily to politics, not art. Indeed, like many events now claiming the prestige and perquisites of art, "Shifting Power" was essentially a pep rally in the campaign to transform art and cultural life into an arena for political activism.

What the campaign itself signifies is nothing less than the subordination of all intellectual and artistic endeavor to a radical political agenda. Its goal, as the title of the conference made clear, is power. Under the banners of multiculturalism, feminism, and sundry other radical causes, the Women's Caucus for Art seeks to impose upon both the study and the creation of art a rigid system of political tests that, if adopted, would effectively liquidate the very concept of art. In keeping with this political objective, the Caucus's program of lectures, panel discussions, and "lunch and networking" sessions featured such topics as "Women of Color: The Art in Life and the Life in Art," "Lesbian Artists: Reclaiming the Past, Defining the Present," "Dangerous Transgressions: Showing Our Teeth," and "Firing the Canon: Feminism, Art History and the Status of the Canonical."

Anyone familiar with the tenor of cultural and academic life today will recognize that all this is simply business as usual. These and kindred other radical efforts at imposing social change in the name of art have in just a few years transformed themselves from peripheral irritations into a constellation of powerful new orthodoxies. Artistic achievement counts for nothing in these new orthodoxies, and intellectual probity is scarcely a memory. It is no longer possible to ask of any proposition or proposal "Is it true?" The governing question now is "Does it further our political goals?" To raise questions about artistic quality is to be out of order—and probably out of a job. The new orthodoxy demands that such questions be supplanted by political tests: "Are there enough women (blacks, homosexuals, Chicanos, etc.) represented?"

None of this is any longer news, of course. But at these events it always turns out that things are worse than you think. This was vividly illustrated by the conference's keynote address, "Can Art History Survive

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Feminism?" The address was delivered by Griselda Pollock, a professor of art history at the University of Leeds and a well-known purveyor of academic Marxist arcana. Although her talk was little more than a congeries of clichés about "patriarchal" society, the depredations of capitalism, and the allegedly sexist nature of modernism, Professor Pollock's performance reminded us that the extreme edge of acceptable discourse in cultural matters continues to be transgressed by new claims and absurdities.

"The space of the commodity of capital"; "hegemonic discourse"; "Eurocentric"; "analysis of colonial discourse"; "class power, race power, heterosexualist power"—it all came trippingly off Professor Pollock's tongue like feminist-deconstructionist ticker tape. In one particularly telling phrase, she described her intellectual project, the project of radical feminism, as the "dissolution of all existing formations of knowledge." It was not clear what new forms of knowledge she proposed to replace the accumulated accomplishments of civilization with, only that her proposed destruction would begin with the discipline of art history. She even indulged in a bit of ritual self-criticism, apologizing to the audience for her own "privileged" status as a woman who is, as she put it, white, middle-class, and heterosexual.

At the center of Professor Pollock's address was a discussion of *Manao tupapau* ("The Specter Watches Over Her"), one of Paul Gauguin's most beautiful Tahitian paintings. Professor Pollock spent most of her time abusing Gauguin for his attitude toward women and pondering the inner life of his thirteen-year-old model. For Professor Pollock, the painting existed primarily as a "space of economic and sexual exchange." She agonized over whether she—a white, middle-class heterosexual—was really qualified to discuss the painting in the radical terms she championed, and assured us that though the "specter," the other figure depicted in the painting, is black and of ambiguous gender, it must be thought of as a man and a white man at that.

For Professor Pollock, Gauguin's painting provided both an inventory of its creator's malfeasance and—by the sort of bizarre leap of logic that only a Marxist academic seems capable of making—an indictment of white, middle-class European society *tout court*. Paul Gauguin was, to be sure, an unpleasant fellow: callous to his wife, treacherous to his friends and mistresses, unscrupulous in his business dealings. But what does any of this have to do with the artistic quality of the painting in question?

What was clear throughout Griselda Pollock's keynote address was that terms like "art" or "quality" have absolutely no meaning for this professor of art history. And it was clear, too, that her boast that she and T. J. Clark, the Marxist art historian and her former colleague at Leeds, were out "to get the establishment" was not an idle one. Professor Clark, at least, certainly succeeded in "getting" the establishment in another sense by securing first a well-paid appointment to a full professorship at Harvard and then going on to an even grander position at the University of California at Berkeley.

Can art history survive feminism? It won't if Professor Pollock and her sister radicals in the Women's Caucus for Art have their way. As Professor Pollock candidly proclaimed, feminism is an "intervention *against* art history." She was also candid about the only problems she envisioned with such an "intervention." If we ended art history, she asked, where would we get our Ph.D.s? And without that precious certification, what would feminists do about jobs? What would they do about garnering power? About "getting" the establishment? After all, she explained, "We ultimately do it for the money." Thus the discipline of art history is to be transformed into a conduit for shifting money and power to feminists. And what about art? That was one subject about which Professor Pollock had nothing to say.

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Musical exports

The precarious place of American music within the classical repertory has once again been made clear by the announcement of a Chicago Symphony Orchestra tour to Japan that includes not a single American composition.

There can be no doubt the Chicago Symphony Orchestra has long been one of the great orchestras in the world. Led by Frederick Stock from 1905 to 1942, Fritz Reiner from 1953 to 1963, and Sir Georg Solti (who will retire at the end of the 1990-91 season) from 1969 to the present day, the Chicago has regularly set high standards for musical seriousness and performance excellence. Indeed, the recordings made by Reiner with the orchestra, old as they are, are still much sought by music lovers and audiophiles alike. Now the orchestra is at a turning point: from the 1991-92 season onward, its music director will be Daniel Barenboim, the much-recorded Israeli pianist and conductor.

The current concerts in Japan mark the Chicago's third trip to the Orient. This time the orchestra, under the direction both of Solti and Barenboim, will confine its activities to Japan, playing twelve concerts in all, including six in Tokyo (three of them in the new Suntory Hall) and the remainder in Yokohama, Kurashiki, Osaka (two), Nagoya, and Sendai. The tour is sponsored by Motorola: $900,000 of the $2.15 million budget comes from concert fees, leaving the remainder, or $1.25 million, to be underwritten. Motorola's involvement with the tour is described by a press release in simple enough terms: "Although we have differed with Japan on international trade matters, Motorola holds the people of Japan in very high regard, especially our many fine customers. Bringing the Chicago Symphony Orchestra to Japan is an expression of our appreciation for the many fine relationships we are building in Japan as well as our growing prosperity."

But the symphonic expression of this appreciation demands more than merely a well-led, distinguished orchestra. It also requires a well-made, distinguished choice of music to be played. On this occasion the Chicago is playing splendid works by Beethoven (the Symphony no. 5 and the *Egmont* Overture, conducted by Solti), Brahms (all four symphonies, conducted by Barenboim), Bruckner, Mozart, Mussorgsky, Ravel, Shostakovich, Richard Strauss, and, in a bow to Japanese musical life, Toru Takemitsu. There is no representation of the pride of our American symphonic composition—the music of (to name only the best-known composers) Barber, Copland, Hanson, Harris, Piston, and William Schuman. One looks in vain, too, for the younger American composers whose commissioning the Chicago has made so much of recently.

Perhaps the restricted menu of the current tour repertory is no more than an accident; one surely hopes so. What is so disturbing, however, is that the exclusion of American composition may be no accident at all, and that the selection of Daniel Barenboim as Chicago's music director represents an unspoken acceptance of the false notion that America is only a consumer, not a producer, of distinguished Western classical music. If this false notion is accepted in music-loving Chicago, it cannot be long before it will creep into the consciousness of those cities, like New York, now looking for (or about to look for) new conductors.

This notion of our musical inferiority is not only false in purely musical terms, it is also damaging to the position of classical music in the United States. Presenting this body of masterworks as a European art form in whose creation we as Americans have had no part is a sure way to kill our still strong, but increasingly beleaguered, love for this great art. One wishes the new orchestral regime in Chicago luck—but musical luck also requires an appreciation of musical value, even if that value is American in origin. The next Chicago tour programs will bear careful watching indeed.

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Cynthia Ozick, T. S. Eliot & high culture: an exchange

Cynthia Ozick and Hilton Kramer

The article by Hilton Kramer entitled "Cynthia Ozick's Farewell to T. S. Eliot—and High Culture," in the February issue of The New Criterion, *was written in response to a very long essay, "T. S. Eliot at 101," which Cynthia Ozick published in* The New Yorker *on November 20, 1989. In the following exchange of letters, Miss Ozick and Mr. Kramer further amplify their views on the questions raised by both the original essay and Mr. Kramer's response to it.*
—The Editors

Letter from Cynthia Ozick

Dear Hilton Kramer:
The February *New Criterion* is in my hands and I am aghast and agape. How can Hilton Kramer, a critic both principled and nuanced, have fallen into so spectacular an error?

You quote me accurately: "The wall that divided serious high culture from the popular arts is breached," and (about the pedestrian quality of so much contemporary verse) "music is not wanted, history is not wanted, idea is not wanted. Even literature is not much wanted"—whereupon you conclude that the essay you deplore weighs in on the side of "supporting the *Kulturkampf* that is now upon us."

You have taken a lament for an assault, analysis for advocacy. You have mistaken a plaint on behalf of serious art for an attack on serious art. How can it have been possible for so subtle an intelligence as Hilton Kramer's to have made so massive a mistake?

You are familiar with some of the things I've written; do you think it reasonable, or likely, that a congeries of hard-won convictions, and the entire grain of a temperament, and the matrix of a set of standards, are all capable of changing their spots overnight? What could possibly motivate so drastic an alteration, and in one fell swoop? You and I have known each other for some time, certainly not well, but in friendly contexts: from what in my character as it has revealed itself to you do you deduce this instant fickleness of which I stand accused? Have I gone from responsibility to "assassination" in a day, in a flash? Do you suppose me suddenly malleable, all at once servile to "the *Kulturkampf* that is now upon us"? (Surely my essay shows no signs of servility to a movement wherein, I note, "hamburger advertisements and television sitcoms can be serious objects of up-to-date critical examination.") Do you not even remotely trust in the consistency of human character? What, in short, has impelled you to misread so radically?

The germ of this essay lay in a question that Robert Gottlieb, editor of *The New Yorker*, put—not so much to me as to our generation: the very question that is the premise of your own response. "For decades," you write, "Eliot had bestrode the world as a colossus, but now he had disappeared from that world without a trace." Gottlieb wanted to know how this astonish-

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ing disappearance had come about, and I undertook to find out. My "reply" to the question is, I believe, not much more than an extended restatement of the question itself—the literary pickle we are in nowadays, including the accelerating disrespect for serious high culture. I described that pickle: I did not commend it. Why have you taken description for commendation?

Worse yet, you attribute to me, via a Van Wyck Brooks work I haven't read (my nativist education is full of gaps), the very position on "alien races" that we find so distasteful in Eliot himself. Can you not see that I was adumbrating a point of view, not pressing for it (hence the "may" in my sentence structure), when I spoke of high culture as "an unsuccessful transplant" in America? Indeed, my own, my personal, testimony follows immediately afterward: for my own generation, I wrote, "the truth is that we had the experience and were irradiated by the meaning." Do you really imagine that Allen Ginsberg (with whom I have had deadly political quarrels at PEN) has replaced Henry James as one of my culture heroes?

And right here—on the question of "alien"—you severely disappoint me with an unworthy aside, when you speak on page eight of a "Jewish tradition neither indigenous nor widely shared." Not indigenous? Not widely shared? Do you forget our Puritan-Hebraic origins? Do you forget the explicit source of the Fifth Amendment? Do you forget the covenantal theory of a Constitution binding diverse bloodlines through an act of intellectual allegiance to a set of jurisprudential principles? Do you forget the Biblical heritage that is intrinsic to our language and literature? It is inconceivable that a spokesman for Western civilization, or even for *The New Criterion*, should offer this view, since you ignore on page eight what *The New Criterion* appears to applaud on page two (Western civilization as "the great line from Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome"). Allow me to draw your attention to one of the noisiest aspects of the current *Kulturkampf*—its assault on Western values—in this reminder from Geoffrey Hartman (the context is higher education): "Yet Judaism is the Third Pillar of Western Civilization (the others being Christianity and the Classics), a civilization presently under attack for its parochialism and feverishly expanding its consciousness of the other without having fully acknowledged the other in its midst." And in the wake of your having dismissed the most venerable pillar of Western culture as "neither indigenous nor widely shared," you charge *me* with a cultural disavowal tantamount to "an act of intellectual violence"?

You object to what you call a "lethal combination of biographical analysis and political demolition," on which you claim I base an "attack on a great poet and a great literary period." The most superficial reading of what I wrote makes plain that I was driven by nostalgia for that same literary period, and by a strong sense of cultural loss. How is it possible for you to say of the longing I overtly express for "the power and prestige of high art" that I "vehemently repudiate" it, that I "join forces with the campaign to discredit the purposes of high art"? How can such a bizarre misreading be justified?

The piece also incorporated reviews of a new biography and a new edition of Eliot's letters. Since you not long ago invited me to review for *The New Criterion* the Lyall H. Powers edition of the James-Wharton correspondence, and reported that it moved you to tears, I assume you do not look down on the illuminations supplied by biographical information. All the personal biographical material on Eliot (with the exception of the Pound connection and the long career at Faber), by the way, was utterly unknown to me when I began to write; and I am clearly not the only one to be startled by those revelations, a number of which are certainly new to us. As you point out, however, the record of Eliot's anti-Semitism is not in the least new; but that doesn't mean that this unsavory issue doesn't, in a great poet, have the power to continue to startle—or that, because it is not new, it should not be made

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accessible to the notorious historical amnesia of the new generation. And to your unrepresentatively short list of literary fascists and/or anti-Semites, you might easily have added Chaucer, Shakespeare, D. H. Lawrence, Céline, Dickens, and many others who escape me at the moment. Yet where in my piece did I propose a "purge," or suggest "tests of character and politics"? What I did was recount a man's life. If, for you, description soon begins to equal purge, who is to blame for that?

I'm afraid you are also off the mark when you fault me for biographical reductionism and for having failed to acknowledge that "a work of art might transcend the conditions of its creation and acquire an existence and a meaning quite separate from the life that produced it." Hardly so, or I would not have been able to speak of "The Waste Land" as "the very text and texture of modernism—modernism's consummate document and ode"—words that surely testify to a poem that has achieved "an existence and a meaning quite separate from the life that produced it." In the case of Eliot, however, this immaculate segregation of the work from the man led too many of our generation to conclude, by some strange analogy, that the man was himself immaculate. And—confronted as I inevitably was by the presence of two fresh volumes of biographical matter, and by my rereading of *The Idea of a Christian Society*, with its shameless resentment of "the implication that what is Nazi is wrong, and need not be discussed on its own merits"—that notion, it seemed to me, was in need of contemporary exploration. As I commented on this question to a correspondent whose admiration for Eliot's achievement remains as undiminished as your own, "There is a difference, I think, between being swept away by the poetry and being swept away by the poet. In Eliot's case (and not only in Eliot's case), I willingly agree to the first but hope to avoid the second. In 1948 [the year of the Nobel], and in the years of Eliot's ascendancy, this distinction was rarely sought." Is it really your wish, even at this late date, if not to obliterate the distinction, then to set it aside as worthless?

Finally, I ought to mention that I have been astonished by the uncommon notice given to this piece, a notice I never remotely expected. Yet there have been only two bitterly angry responses. One is yours. The other came from a wild-eyed member of the radical Left, who after numerous paragraphs of vituperation concluded: "If it is the case that the wall separating high art and what you imply but do not name as 'pop culture' has fallen, we should greet this event with a cry of celebration." He is angry with me because I did not cry out in celebration. You are angry because you imagine I *did* cry out in celebration. How odd that in this instance a silly fanatic with a destructive credo (a professor of English, of course) should read more ably than the editor of *The New Criterion*.

I wish, then, that you would take another look, and reconsider your charges: I beseech you in the Bowels of Christ (or of Moses, if you prefer a less widely shared set of entrails) to think you may be mistaken. You have made an error. You have blatantly misread. You have done me an injustice—and yourself as well. After all, you point out with no small force that we are presently in "a climate and a marketplace in which the aspirations of high art are mocked and subverted by the agencies and institutions . . . that formerly served as their champions and custodians." Under such a condition of siege, so to speak, a general who insists on shooting down his own troops can hardly complain that his positions are insufficiently defended.

Sincerely,
Cynthia Ozick

Reply from Hilton Kramer

Dear Cynthia:
Well, it is now my turn to be aghast. If it was your intention to write a defense of either T. S. Eliot or of high culture, then it has to be said that the great effort you have lavished upon this endeavor is a complete failure, and I am indeed aghast that a writer of your talent and perspicacity should so badly mis-

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judge the results of your labors. The essay you published in *The New Yorker* contained the most protracted and categorical assault on Eliot's character and career to appear in a well-known periodical in our lifetime. That it may also have been in part what you call a "lament" did nothing to modify the ferocity of the assault itself. You offered your readers no reason to believe—but none!—that there is today, right now, anything left to defend, never mind exalt or emulate, in Eliot's great work as a poet and critic.

Consider what you actually wrote on this subject. Your passing references to Eliot's poetry treated it for the most part as something to be "decoded"—your word—for what you characterized as its wholly shameful revelations. Your essay acknowledged Eliot's criticism, which may very well be the single most important body of literary criticism in English in this century, solely for the purpose of mocking its style—"an 'I' set in ice from the celestial vault." Your essay was from start to finish an unremitting attack on Eliot's moral and intellectual integrity. It ridiculed him as "an autocratic, inhibited, depressed, rather narrow-minded, and considerably bigoted fake Englishman." It imputed to his concept of high art a virtual complicity in the Nazi atrocities—"So much for where high art and traditional culture landed Eliot"—and described his notion of the "objective correlative" in poetry as "no more than a device to shield the poet from the raw shame of confession." It derided the size of his poetic oeuvre—"amazingly small"—as if artistic achievement could be assessed in purely quantitative terms, and heaped scorn upon the stature of his church—"an island church, after all"—as if the place occupied by the Church of England in the religious, cultural, and social history of the English-speaking world had nothing to do with our own civilization. The language used to describe Eliot's life and work was unrelievedly derogatory—"sneering," "timorous," "hidden," "elitist," "impersonations," "triteness," "termite," "a foreigner." Eliot was accused of, among much else, abusing his wife, abandoning his friends, and thumbing his nose at his readers. About Eliot's literary achievement the readers of your essay were invited to believe that it had already receded "into the parochial," and that, in any case, "it may be simply that it is in the renunciatory grain of America to resist the hierarchical and the traditional," as if the entire history of our country and our culture could be so easily encapsulated in such a sweeping and simplistic formulation.

In the resounding peroration that brought your very long essay to a close, moreover, there was no support voiced for Eliot's enduring accomplishment, no claim whatever made for the value of the high culture that Eliot had come to symbolize. On the contrary, you treated both as historical phenomena that might now properly be regarded as fundamentally alien to our civilization. "Eliot's 'high culture' [now mockingly enclosed in quotation marks] and its regnancy in and beyond the American university," you wrote, "may have been an unsuccessful transplant that 'took' temporarily but in the end would be rejected by the formation of natural tissue." And when you wrote in the penultimate sentence of your essay—and wrote with a force that was intended to be crushing—that "In the wake of the last forty years, it is now our unsparing obligation to disclaim the reactionary Eliot," you offered no word on behalf of what might now be worth saving in Eliot, and I emphasize the word *now*. Clearly you discern no "unsparing obligation" in this regard. All you could muster in closing was a sentimental evocation of a youthful enthusiasm: "What we will probably go on missing forever is that golden cape of our youth, the power and prestige of high art." Even that equivocal "probably" was entirely characteristic of the "outs" you allowed yourself wherever in this essay you felt obliged to acknowledge an admiration safely consigned to the past.

Believe me, dear Cynthia, with friends like the author of "T. S. Eliot at 101," high culture in America needs no enemies. With this essay you have done their work more effectively than they could ever have done

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themselves, if only because you bring greater gifts to the task and carry out its mission of destruction from inside what remains of that besieged citadel. It comes as no surprise to me that you are not to be forgiven by the entrenched enemies of high culture for the *nostalgia* that you still harbor over the loss that your essay explores but does nothing to mitigate or retrieve. I don't wonder that "a wild-eyed member of the radical Left," as you call him, found your assault on Eliot and high culture insufficient to his purposes. The assassins of high culture will never be satisfied with anything less than its total liquidation, and they are correct to discern in what I described as "the litany of regrets" in your essay a nostalgic attachment to a past they abominate and would repeal if they could. You are right to characterize your essay as "driven by nostalgia." But you do not seem to understand that in the argument over high culture that is addressed in your essay nostalgia is a feeble defense, if it is any defense at all, for it compromises the very ground we stand on by surrendering everything of importance to the past. It is not on the basis of nostalgia that we can resist the depredations that now afflict our culture; it is only by resisting and confronting them here and now—and not in some dreamscape of happier times—that we can save what needs to be saved and build upon its foundation something enduring for the future.

In carrying out that task, we must keep alive and perpetually refreshed in the foreground of our minds the memory of past achievement—a practice we now see forfeited, if not already forbidden, in so many of our institutions of higher learning—but this essential intellectual labor, which is central to the fate of high culture, will not be helped, it can only be undermined and atrophied, by scenarios of nostalgia. It will not be helped, either, by rehearsing precisely those chapters of the past—Eliot's politics, for example—that for good reason have long been discarded, while engaging in a comprehensive disparagement of the very work that brought us to Eliot in the first place, his poetry and his criticism. You are wrong, by the way, in your statement that in 1948 the difference between what you described as "being swept away by the poetry and being swept away by the poet" was "a distinction . . . rarely sought." In 1948 I was an undergraduate reading Eliot for the first time, and I still have on my bookshelf the volume published that year called *T. S. Eliot: A Selected Critique*, edited by Leonard Unger, in which, among many admiring and illuminating accounts of Eliot's poetry and criticism, ample space was found for the rejection of his social and political views by, among other eminences, Mark Van Doren, Malcolm Cowley, Granville Hicks, and Harold J. Laski, and for a lengthy and categorical challenge to Eliot's entire literary outlook written by Yvor Winters. And when, in the early 1950s, Clement Greenberg wrote that "[w]ithout forgetting Aristotle, Johnson, Coleridge, Lessing, Goethe, certain Frenchmen of the nineteenth century, Ezra Pound, or the early Kenneth Burke, I dare to suggest that T. S. Eliot may be the best of all literary critics," he could not, I think, be accused of being so "swept away" by the poet that he was in any sense blind to Eliot's anti-Semitism. Nostalgia, alas, is as poor a substitute for the actualities of literary history as it is a feeble instrument for defending high culture.

About the other issues raised in your letter, I will mention only two. On the subject of biography and its application to criticism, the only rule to be observed is that a work of art must never be reduced to a biographical datum. I have great respect for the art of biography when it is practiced as an art, but it is for their intelligence about the lives of their subjects—and not for their tendency to turn every work of art into a re-enactment of a purely biographical scenario—that great biographers are to be esteemed. Even our finest biographers tend to suffer from a professional deformation in this respect, which is why so few first-rate biographers make first-rate critics. Eliot was absolutely right when he wrote that "[h]onest criticism and sensitive appreciation are directed not upon the poet but the

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poetry," and it was because you seemed to be endorsing and insisting upon this very distinction in your "Forewarning" to *Metaphor & Memory* that I found your total abandonment of it in your essay on Eliot so shocking. Biography can tell us a great deal that we need to know about a writer, but it is a poor guide to the substance and quality of his work—to the very reason, in other words, that we are interested in it. It can take us to the very threshold of the literary object, but once we cross that threshold and enter the work itself, we are obliged to recognize that we have entered upon another order of experience. It is not that life plays no role in the creation of a work of art; of course it does. But the role that it does play is often so complex, so oblique, often so elusive and contradictory, that the sheer application of biographical criticism is bound to defeat any real understanding of the work. Biography is simply too crude an instrument for penetrating the mysteries of art, though in the hands of a master it can—and does—do much to penetrate the mysteries of life. When I wrote of your "attempt to reduce every line of Eliot's poetry to a crass biographical datum," I was simply describing what you had done—and done in violation of the critical standard you invoked for the understanding of your own work as a writer.

On the question of Jewish tradition, which I described in my essay as "neither indigenous nor widely shared" in American cultural life: You ask me if I have forgotten "our Puritan-Hebraic origins"? I hasten to assure you I have not. I grew up in a small New England town where it was not at all uncommon to encounter teachers and clergymen who, having been educated in the old theological tradition—a tradition, by the way, that owed something to the "island church" you were concerned to disparage—were as fluent in Hebrew as they were in Greek and Latin. But these learned gentlemen would have been astonished to discover that they had much to do with the observance or even awareness of Jewish tradition in the modern world. Many of them were, in fact, anti-Semitic in the casual social way that was common at the time. It was you, not I, in any case, who introduced the odious question of a "natural tissue" in American cultural life that might be invoked as the basis for rejecting "Eliot's 'high culture.'"

Dear Cynthia, I have read and reread your attack on Eliot many times, and I do not believe there is any basis for the charge that I have done that essay an injustice. But I am beginning to see that you may have done yourself an injustice in writing an essay that might indeed have been intended as "a plaint" but comes through loud and clear to many of us as an assault on the very things you say we share. It was precisely because I have long regarded you as an esteemed ally in the battles we face that I found your essay so deeply shocking. I am shocked again to discover that you meant it to be a defense of what it egregiously ridiculed and consigned to the past. If we are to learn something from this unfortunate episode, which, I assure you, grieves me as much as it obviously does you, it may be this: that in the discussion of these very grave issues, upon the resolution of which so much depends, we must all observe a very strict standard of explicitness in what we write about them. As a defense of high culture, this was a standard that "T. S. Eliot at 101" disastrously failed to meet.

Sincerely,
Hilton

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Whittaker Chambers, man of letters

by Sam Tanenhaus

Within the space of a generation—that is, since 1964, when *Cold Friday* was published to tepid reviews—Whittaker Chambers has been all but forgotten as a writer. Those conversant with the Alger Hiss case know, of course, that from the 1920s through the 1950s Chambers was frequently—at times steadily—in print. But his most enduring utterance seems to be the testimony he gave before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1948. Scholars of the Cold War seldom look beyond it to the ample personal record he left behind in his poetry, fiction, and journalism; few bother even with *Witness, Cold Friday*, and *Odyssey of a Friend*.[1] The work is there. It just doesn't seem important. Charitable verdicts usually go no further than Sidney Hook's late judgment, recorded in his autobiography *Out of Step* (1987), that had Chambers "escaped involvement in politics, he probably would have blossomed into a poet of stature." This view—of Chambers as writer manqué—neatly fits the demonology of the Hiss case. But is it accurate?

It is indeed the case that Chambers abandoned a burgeoning literary career in 1932, when he slipped into the mousehole of the Communist underground and began a six-year term of espionage. It is also the case that not long after he resurfaced, in 1938, he joined the staff of *Time*—where he attained considerable influence as a writer and editor—and that, once the Hiss case ended, in 1950, he resumed his literary efforts, which he continued until his death in 1961. The problem is not, then, one of diligence. Is it one of talent? But he met with success as a poet, made a reputation as a translator, enjoyed instant celebrity as a short-story writer, and produced, in *Witness*, "one of the most significant autobiographies of the twentieth century" (said Hook) and a confession of "almost classical stature" (said Irving Howe). Nor, finally, was the problem one of seriousness. Chambers assayed grand issues and his sensibility was keyed to the moral crises of his era. Indeed, one could reasonably argue that he was uniquely serious—even in his most irresponsible phase. Many other American writers also served the revolutionary cause, but almost always as dilettantes who put little on the line and who consequently added almost nothing, despite their earnest efforts, to the literature of politics; in the radical Thirties political engagement meant, by and large, what it means today—signing petitions, attending rallies, joining committees, squabbling in the pages of journals. Not so for Chambers, who

1 *Witness*, the autobiography of Whittaker Chambers, was published in 1952; a paperback edition, with a preface by Robert Novak and a foreword by Milton Hindus, is available from Regnery Gateway. *Cold Friday*, a posthumous collection of memoirs and fragments edited by Duncan Norton-Taylor, was published in 1964. *Odyssey of a Friend: Whittaker Chambers's Letters to William F. Buckley, Jr., 1954-61*, was published in 1969.

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sojourned in the dark world of aliases, stolen documents, and orders sent from the Kremlin. It is commonly said that his motives were personal rather than political, that he embraced revolution not as a practical plan but as a species of romantic adventure. The same could be said of John Reed or, for that matter, of Trotsky. And Chambers's political role did not end with his thirteen years of radicalism. It was he, more than any other intellectual, who awakened the American public to the dangers of totalitarianism, and his anti-Communist doctrine, spelled out as early as 1945, shaped the worldview of many postwar conservatives, including that of Ronald Reagan, his long-time admirer.

The real problem is that our culture has no tradition of men who meaningfully reconcile the claims of politics and art, and on this count Chambers, whose career was a sustained attempt at just such a reconciliation, stands convicted of un-American activity. Indeed he possibly inherited less of the native literary tradition than any other American writer of his time. His heroes were Dante, Dostoevsky, and Kafka. The book that opened his mind in childhood was *Les Misérables*. His favorite modern poet was Rilke, his favorite novelist Arthur Koestler (who reciprocated Chambers's esteem). A quick glance at his published letters shows how steeped he was in the political and literary legacy of Europe, a legacy enriched by writers who translated their interior struggles, especially political and spiritual struggles, into the universal language of fable and allegory. It was not a coincidence that during the controversy that surrounded *Witness*, his strongest support came from abroad. "You are one of those," said one of his champions, André Malraux, "who did not return from Hell with empty hands."

The Hell was Stalinism, and Chambers's *Inferno* remains the best account of it written in the United States. Yet this major book has long been shunned like bad magic—alien in tone, anomalous in form, dangerous in meaning. Even the acclaim that greeted it on its publication in 1952 was mixed with abhorrence. Chambers saw what he famously termed the "tragedy of history" as a test of faith and the Manichaean rhetoric he used to describe it, though acceptable to a later generation, placed him outside the charmed circle of enlightened opinion forty years ago. "The most remarkable thing about *Witness*," wrote Irving Howe, "is that as a work of ideas it should be so raggedy and patchy. In all its 800 pages there is hardly a sustained passage of, say, 5,000 words devoted to a serious development of thought: everything breaks down into sermon, reminiscence, self-mortification, and self-justification." Chambers's prose was equally queer. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., writing in *Saturday Review*, praised its vividness but shuddered at its "un-Anglo-Saxon intensity." In *The New Republic*, Merle Miller called *Witness* "sick." This distaste found its definitive expression two decades later when Lionel Trilling remarked that after the 1920s "something went soft and 'high' in [Chambers's] tone and I was never again able to read him either in his radical or in his religiose conservative phase without a touch of queasiness."[2] Just as certain lurid adjectives ritually cling to descriptions of Chambers's physical presence (drab, disheveled, soiled), so do their equivalents adhere to assessments of his prose style (apocalyptic, portentous, maudlin). In truth, Chambers's writing is rarely as overblown as people often suppose, and when he's carried away it's usually for a good reason. "Fear," he wrote in *Witness*,

> makes [ex-Communists] strident. They are like breathless men who have outrun the lava flow of a volcano and must shout down the smiles of villagers at its base who, regardless of their own peril, remember complacently that those who now try to warn them once offered their faith and their lives to the murderous mountain.

2 From Trilling's introduction to the 1975 reissue of *The Middle of the Journey* (1947). Gifford Maxim, the pivotal character of this, Trilling's only novel, was based on Chambers.

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More than an explanation, this is a parable. And it is not surprising that so few critics acknowledge the parabolic essence of *Witness*, for to do so they must acknowledge, as well, the moral authority of a self-styled counter-revolutionary who repudiated one of the hallowed intellectual projects of his day—the attempt to extricate a viable liberalism from the wreckage of the Popular Front. Pundits find it easier to assail Chambers's arguments ("Faith in God or Faith in Man?") than to wrestle with the implications of his narrative and its irrefutable message: "I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there." In 1952 it fell to Rebecca West to marvel, in *The Atlantic*, that Chambers the memoirist "makes the further discoveries about reality, pushing another half-inch below the surface, which writers hope to make when they write." And it fell to West, who had herself "endured rough weather" in childhood, to point out how unwelcome certain "reminiscences are, and how likely to be greeted with impatient suggestions that they are exaggerated or are the figments of self-pity."

Irving Howe, for instance, dismissed Chambers's reminiscences as "a needless act of masochism." Needless, one wonders, for whom? Certainly not for anyone hoping to understand Chambers's passionate pilgrimage from hopelessness to belief. His family was the first Hell he knew. It "represented in miniature," as he put it, the crisis of the middle class. And it made him a candidate for other Hells. If we blanch at times during the course of Chambers's confessions—if we want to avert our eyes from his domestic *mises en scène*—it is because their plausibility fills us with dread: the lunatic grandmother stabbing the air with scissors; the cold, thwarted father secretly building his tiny toy theater in a room barred to his wife and sons; the shopkeeper cruelly leaning over a countertop to sneer (at the young Chambers), "Your mother is a broken down stagecoach." It was, as West said, "intricate and ambitious misery," and Chambers dredged up every detail. Was he masochistic? Perhaps, but so was Proust, the author of another "sick" book, another prodigious feat of recollection. Chambers, after all, had come before the public as an official rememberer, a witness summoned against his will. No wonder he often brooded on the fate of another reluctant bearer of bad news:

> I have, for years [he wrote William F. Buckley, Jr.], been fascinated by the Book of Jonah, and I said to a few at the time that that was the pattern of the Hiss Case. Therefore, in a sense, I fled to Tarshish with the dread words in my ears: "Go up unto Ninevah, that great city, etc." But, when the tempest arose, and it became a question of myself or the crew, I had also to say: "Take me up and cast me into the sea, because it is for my sake that this trouble is come upon you." . . . But, in the end, I did go unto Ninevah, and when nothing really happened . . . and others had eaten up the cucumber vine, and God had asked: "Do you well to be angry?" I answered and still answer: "I do well to be angry, even unto death."

In his later years, Chambers lumped together all his early writing as the noxious by-product of a misspent youth. He was born in Philadelphia in 1901, and grew up in Lynbrook, Long Island, the elder son of a commercial artist and a sometime actress. At an early age he acquired an appetite for literature and exhibited a rare gift for languages; but when he graduated from high school, in 1919, he put off going to college and instead went on the road, intent on reaching Mexico. Four months later—after a stint of vagabondage and day labor—he was stranded in a New Orleans flophouse and had to wire home for money. He returned to Lynbrook, toiled briefly in the Manhattan ad agency where his father did layouts, and then enrolled at Columbia. Morningside Heights was an exceptionally lively place, with an undergraduate population that included World War I veterans and, unusual for the Ivy League in the Twenties, many products of the local public schools. Chambers fell in with a group of city boys, most of them Jews, most of them inflamed with intellectual aspirations: Mortimer J. Adler, Clifton Fadiman, Meyer Schapiro,

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Louis Zukofksy, and others. They initiated him into the charms of skeptical humanism, and he moved among them as a magnetic presence, often silent, sometimes oracular, prone to sudden outbursts of hilarity.

Like the others, Chambers joined Boar's Head, a kind of "Conversazione Society," and tagged after Mark Van Doren, the "master of sunny influence," as Chambers later called him. In 1920, Van Doren was twenty-six, an English Department rookie assigned as Chambers's adviser; in this capacity he steered the gifted freshman away from the reflexive Republicanism he had inherited from his parents (Chambers's themes were sprinkled with quotations from Calvin Coolidge) and also, Chambers wrote in *Cold Friday*, "infected me with the idea that the literary life is the best in the world and that to be a poet is among the highest callings known to man." Better yet, Van Doren encouraged Chambers to believe "that I was to be a poet." This belief was shared by others. "We were convinced he would leap into instant fame," recalled Jacques Barzun, a younger Columbia man. Another, Lionel Trilling, allowed that "Chambers had a very considerable college prestige as a writer. This was deserved. My undergraduate admiration for his talent was recently confirmed when I went back to the poetry and prose he published in a student magazine in 1924-25. At that time he wrote with an elegant austerity." The magazine was *Morningside*. Chambers made his debut in it as a sophomore with a story called "The Damn Fool," a somewhat clotted narrative inspired by Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness."[3] Its hero, a young sailor flushed with idealism, ships to Russia and dies there in battle after leading a charge against the Bolsheviks. The plot alone is prophetic. But consider some clairvoyant remarks tossed off by secondary characters:

> "He wasn't a Bolshevist. He was a Puritan, perhaps. That is radical, of course. He was an extremist."

> "What he did gives weakness a false appearance of glory. He wasn't glorious. How many weary miles did he tramp to escape himself."

> "Probably he could have been a writer if he hadn't been so interested, after all, in life."

"The Damn Fool" contains the hard kernel of the sensibility that exfoliated thirty years later in *Witness*. Already we see Chambers's fascination with revolution, his flare for self-dramatization—tempered with self-appraisal—and his intuitive grasp of what his opponents are thinking. And there is that elegant austerity. Not quite twenty-one, Chambers writes disturbingly mature sentences, free of undergraduate artifice. Words for him are an instrument, and he puts them to the task of finding remedies for "the incurable sickness of the world." The young Chambers is often represented as a nihilist. In fact, he was already embarked on the search for a sustaining faith. A quatrain from this time pointedly borrows the rhyme scheme of Tennyson's great elegy, "In Memoriam":

> And we on whom its shadow falls—
> A sober and containing air—
> Feel it as tired and late despair
> Between enfolding iron walls.

From confession Chambers advanced to controversy. This was in 1922, a year of bold literary statements; Chambers read "The Waste Land" in *The Dial*. His own *succès de scandale* appeared that autumn in *Morningside*. He was now a junior, the magazine's editor in chief and the author of the lead piece in the November number, "A Play for Puppets." In it Jesus arises from the tomb to refuse the burden of divinity. This blasphemy—perceived as a prank despite its earnest attempt to humanize Christ—became an issue during the Hiss trial. So did it in 1922, as Chambers suspected it might:

3 "The Damn Fool" was published in the March 1922 *Morningside*. Copies of this and the other issues of *Morningside* mentioned in this article are in the Columbiana Collection, Columbia University.

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he published it, in fact, under a pseudonym, "John Kelly." Faculty members clamored for Chambers's expulsion, there was a fuss in the New York newspapers, and the offending author was summoned to the office of Dean Herbert E. Hawkes, a stern disciplinarian whose father had led a Union regiment in the Civil War. Chambers was ordered to retract his playlet and to collect all copies of the magazine. He demurred and was stripped of his editorship. But he was not expelled, as is often alleged. He quit Columbia of his own accord and announced the decision in a note he sent Hawkes in January 1923. The episode set the pattern for other, Jonah-like performances: Chambers learned early that unseemly utterances carry a price. This would be confirmed when he wrote "The Ghosts on the Roof" (1945), which outraged *Time* staffers with its dire warnings about Soviet expansionism, confirmed again when he testified before HUAC, and yet again when, in the pages of *National Review*, he defended Alger Hiss's right to a passport. Once an idea—atheism, in this early instance—took hold of Chambers, he had to state it loudly. Polite aestheticism could only mock, not raze, the enfolding iron walls. Many years later Chambers put the case this way: "the natural habit of Mark [Van Doren]'s mind (like that of many academic liberals) was to treat ideas as having an existence apart from life; their delight was in their multiplex play; ideas never implied acts. The natural habit of my mind was the exact opposite. Ideas as intellectual game scarcely interested me at all. For me, an idea was the starting point of an act."

And writing was just such an act. Chambers's near expulsion proved to him that words could rock with seismic force. But they must serve a cause. Atheism wouldn't do. He was by nature a believer, not a skeptic; he needed something to argue for, not against. He found it in the summer of 1923, when he and Meyer Schapiro travelled abroad and got an eyeful of Weimar Germany, then on the brink of anarchy. This was months after French troops had brutally occupied the Ruhr valley and months before Hitler's Munich putsch. The two Americans went to Berlin, where purse-snatching was mirthless sport and marching Communists sent up an ominous chant: *Blut muss fliessen, Blut muss fliessen, Blut, Blut, Blut.* Chambers returned to New York wrapped in Spenglerian gloom. The *Abendland* would sink under its own corrupt weight. The answer was revolution. He read Lenin and Sorel while he held down a night job in the Newspaper Division of the Forty-second Street library (he remained in its employ, on and off, till April 1927). He enrolled again at Columbia in September 1924, promptly cut classes, and in February 1925 joined the Communist Party, feeling "joy and exultation in the thought of surrendering one's self to the wash of the wave, of being carried higher on the sun-touched crests of wild billows than one could ever be by a dry, lonely effort of one's own."

Chambers didn't write those words. Henry James did, in *The Princess Casamassima* (1886). Its protagonist, Hyacinth Robinson, cannot choose between the rival imperatives of art and revolution and ends up a suicide. Chambers, in the middle Twenties, strove to satisfy both claimants. He adopted the unsmiling guise of the young Bolshevik but at the same time honed his poetic skills. The November 1924 *Morningside* includes his tender narrative "Braun." A sailor has returned home to Long Island after many years at sea and now wants to make amends with his father. He ambles along the shore and there meets another solitary walker, a poet, who strikes an uncannily Wordsworthian tone:

> Filled by the sun,
> Moved, as by the tide, as slowly,
> I prolonged the hour of my intention,
> And heard the whistles blow
> Noon in the meadow villages,
> And heard them cease.

Records at Columbia list Chambers as a student until June 1925, but in name only. He was consumed by extracurricular activity. He studied "the law of social revolution"

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under Scott Nearing at the Rand School, was a go-fer for *The Daily Worker*, travelled to the Far West, and wrote poetry. He sent lyrics to Van Doren, now the poetry editor at *The Nation*, who accepted them for publication. In May 1926 Chambers contributed "Railroad Yards (Long Island City)" to the inaugural issue of *New Masses*. Here his considerable feeling for nature succumbs to an ideal vision of "the workers" rising toward collective strength:

> . . . swing of motion thru the darkness
> without stay or let:
> With only the delicate human hands set
> Motionless above the controls, as a threat.

This was written at a time of intense personal anguish. Chambers's brother, Richard, who had passed untouched, it seemed, through the "rough weather" of childhood, had suddenly grown despondent. He dropped out of college, drank incessantly, and talked of suicide. In September 1926, after repeated attempts foiled by Whittaker, Richard succeeded in taking his own life, at twenty-three. Chambers, devastated by the loss, felt the waters closing over his own head, but "[d]eep within me," he wrote, "there was a saving fierceness." He clambered aboard the life raft of the party and busied himself at *The Daily Worker* with editorial and organizational tasks, pausing only to compose lines like these, which appeared in the March 1927 issue: "For the dead, the dead, the dead/we march, comrades, workers." The poem is called "March for the Red Dead" and it is so defiantly unpoetic that it amounts to a proclamation: from now on Chambers's words will be conscripted into the service of, in James's phrase, "the great grim restitution."

But the party, it turned out, was not a safe haven. Chambers had enlisted during a particularly chaotic time, the so-called Third Period, marked by Stalin's brutal and despotic ascent. Party watchdogs in the United States mounted a purge, thinning the ranks of *The Daily Worker*. Chambers quit in disgust in 1929. His literary energy had already found a new channel, thanks to his chum Clifton Fadiman, now an editor at Simon & Schuster. The firm had started up a high-toned imprint, the Inner Sanctum, that was bringing out foreign novels; in 1928 Chambers prepared for it the first English-language edition of Felix Salten's *Bambi*. A Book-of-the-Month Club selection, it was released in a printing of 75,000 copies, complete with a puff from John Galsworthy (who had been bowled over by the galleys of Chambers's translation). The reviews were rhapsodic, and Chambers was instantly in demand. Between 1928 and 1931, he Englished three more books by Salten, Heinrich Mann's *Mother Mary*, Kasimir Edschmid's *The Passionate Rebel* (a fictionalized life of Byron), and Franz Werfel's *Class Reunion*.[4] During the Hiss trial, Werfel's novel, the story of a destructive friendship, was ingeniously though erroneously cited as the inspiration for Chambers's "plot" to destroy Hiss.

This early work remains tucked away in more or less obscure places, and for many years Chambers's journalism was also hard to find. But an important chunk of it has now been exhumed by Terry Teachout and issued as *Ghosts on the Roof: Selected Journalism of Whittaker Chambers, 1931-59*.[5] Teachout includes in his collection four short stories written by Chambers in 1931 and published in *New Masses*. The magazine was presided over by Michael Gold, the author of *Jews Without Money* (1930) and a bleak exemplar of literary Stalinism—a sort of switchman who alertly changed his ideological track as new semaphores were flashed from Moscow. *New Masses* bore Gold's stamp but not his

4 Chambers translated two more books after he left the party. One was about the Red Cross; the other, which he co-translated with Barrows Mussey, was Gustav Regler's *The Great Crusade* (1940), a novel about the Spanish Civil War.

5 *Ghosts on the Roof: Selected Journalism of Whittaker Chambers, 1931-59*, edited and with an introduction by Terry Teachout; Regnery Gateway, 361 pages, $24.95.

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alone. It is a startling experience to examine antique issues of this publication—filled with jejune caricatures of obese capitalists and emaciated workers—and see the illustrious names on its masthead: Sherwood Anderson, Eugene O'Neill, Edmund Wilson, Lewis Mumford. John Dos Passos was a regular contributor—sections of *U.S.A.* originally ran in *New Masses*. Katherine Anne Porter reviewed fiction in it.

Chambers, the renegade "Lovestonite," reached a truce with party regulars and reemerged as a radical writer, though not of verse, "for as soon as I began to shake off the influence of authentic poets, I found myself writing prose." He began with agitprop short stories. On one level, they were flummery; yet Teachout rightly calls them, in his incisive introduction, "the product of a writer of considerable technical skill and a genuinely poetic sensibility." Each story doles out a different morsel of Communist dogma. The message of the first, "Can You Make Out Their Voices?," is "Organize!" Chambers based his story on news reports of a small insurrection in Arkansas, where five hundred destitute farmers had stormed a Red Cross station. It happened in January 1931, the nadir of the Depression, and it heralded the coming revolution, at least in Chambers's treatment. His pious rebels seem lifted from the movies, not from the sod:

> "What did you say you called yourself?"
> "A Communist."
> "That's like a Red, Russians, huh?"
> "No, workingmen and poor farmers, like you and me."

There are, however, taut descriptions of the blighted landscape and its suffering inhabitants, human and animal: "A red-headed woodpecker lay on the front path, its wings spread out. The boys took it into the house. In the shade it revived. They gave it a drop of water; it uttered its single sharp scream." "Can You Make Out Their Voices?" was published in March 1931, and *New Masses* proudly announced a thick drift of fan mail. Hallie Flanagan, of Vassar's Experimental Theater, secured permission for a stage adaptation. She and her collaborator, Margaret Clifford, expanded the original by adding a subplot built around a debutante and her political coming of age. The result, entitled *Can You Hear Their Voices?*, became a staple of the radical repertory. News of Chambers's talent widened on the Left and rippled all the way to Moscow. A Soviet literary journal extolled him for "rais[ing] the image of the Bolshevik." His other stories are more experimental. "The Death of the Communists" concludes with a Brechtian peroration:

> The Communists were obviously men of courage, single-minded no doubt, but capable of a kind of fanatical calm in the face of death, on the basis, however difficult for one of us to comprehend, of certain convictions arrived by means of an intelligence no matter how limited. Were possessed, I mean, of intelligence, conviction, courage. Were, therefore, men, gentlemen, men. Men! Men, do you hear me, you beasts, men!

"The Death of the Communists" appeared in December 1931. Soon Chambers was placed on the editorial board of *New Masses*. But in the spring of 1932, in the wake of his first literary triumph, he was recruited to undertake more useful, clandestine work—work that would lead him, in 1934, to Washington, D.C., and the Communist cell set up there by Harold Ware. When the call came, Chambers, age thirty-one, was the author of several published poems, four stories, and eight translations—hardly the marginal flop who dominates accounts of the Hiss case.

The bulk of *Ghosts on the Roof* consists of articles, reviews, and essays written by Chambers after he arose from the Communist netherworld in 1938. It took him a year to find a steady job, but it was a good one, on the staff of *Time*. (The man who hired him, T. S. Matthews, had reviewed *Class Reunion*, favorably, in *The New Republic*.)

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Chambers shared an office with James Agee, with whom he formed a close friendship, especially after Chambers discovered God (Agee was a tormented Episcopalian). They also led their section—book and film reviews—to the top of the reader polls. For a man who had struggled up to daylight from the bottom rungs of Hell, the corporate ladder of Time Inc. was not insurmountable. Chambers scaled it nimbly. It helped that he had a wife and two children to support and that his party salary had peaked at $165 a month (in the Thirties spies rarely were in it for the money). At *Time* Chambers routinely worked forty-eight-hour shifts, and in 1942 he suffered the first of several heart attacks (the last would kill him). By his own estimation, he wrote a thousand articles for Henry Luce—news stories, features, reviews, occasional essays. None, as a rule, was signed. Hence, Teachout and his research assistant, Patrick Swan, have had to do some detective work. Luckily, not even the lacquer of Timese can entirely obscure an original style. It is undoubtedly Chambers that Teachout has given us—the rounded phrases, the wide learning. Sidney Hook was right to call Chambers an autodidact, despite all those semesters at Columbia. He had the autodidact's fondness for making big connections and the autodidact's fingertip command of everything he's read.

Time Inc. was not just a publishing company. It was the prototype of today's corporation, a pretend empire. Its monarch, Luce, noticed Chambers right away—first his prose, then his manner. Chambers was a potent presence. People smiled at his glum countenance, portly figure (loosely bagged in oversized suits), and enigmatic air. Not many smiled at his politics: these were the days when "right-wing" meant Trotskyist, and as Chambers evolved toward anti-Communism, he undertook to reorient the political views of his colleagues. "The driving force of my work at *Time*," he wrote Luce in a letter quoted by Teachout, "has been a sense of mission, of calling." He was girding for Ninevah. He polarized the local chapter of the Newspaper Guild, regaled colleagues with tales from the underground, and campaigned for the editorship of *Time*'s "Foreign News" section. He got the job in 1944. The war was ending, and Luce, who agreed with Chambers that the Soviet Union loomed as the next global threat, gave him license to promote this worldview, even if certain writers did not share it. There were mutinous showdowns with John Hersey, Theodore White, and others. In 1945, after Chambers blacked out on a train, he was relegated to the culture desk. There, partnered again with Agee, he produced his celebrated cover stories on Reinhold Niebuhr, Arnold Toynbee, Rebecca West, and Marian Anderson—each an example of oratorical journalism raised to a standard that would never be surpassed at *Time*.

Chambers was Luce's pet writer. Few begrudged him his special status. His copy was legendary for its "flow" and he had an infallible eye for the striking image. His skills were shown to best advantage in literary portraits, such as "Silence, Exile & Death" (1941), a haunting précis of James Joyce's flight, his last, from Nazi-occupied Paris: "Every afternoon at 4 sharp, Joyce and [Paul] Léon reread *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce would sit with his long thin legs wrapped inextricably around each other while he held the book close to his eyes, studied it through a thick lens. Léon read aloud. They would then make corrections."

The attacks on *Witness* created an impression—still with us—that Chambers had a weak mind. This wasn't so. True, he sanitized Toynbee (and made him, in the process, a household name), but it was a feat that demanded mental agility and that earned him the admiration of college professors. Those who have avoided *Witness* will be surprised to discover that Chambers could be epigrammatic and astringent: "Fundamentally benevolent and humane, [American intellectuals] loved their fellow countrymen in distress far more than they could ever love them in prosperity." He had, as well, the ability to carve a shapely

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thesis from an inchoate mass of details: George Santayana, wrote Chambers,[6] had

> an integrity of Catholic suppleness and irrefragability, enriched by the deep experience of two cultures (one rock-bound, Protestant and New England, the other Catholic and Mediterranean), international yet intensely local (for most of Santayana's life has been passed in the Spanish provincial city of Avila and the American provincial capital of Boston). It had been lent fluency by his necessity of thinking in two languages, Spanish and English, and tempered by the age's ultimate test of individualism, the discipline of preserving the classic mind, smiling and ascetic, in a world of technological uniformity. It is an integrity in which there is room for humor, for it has traveled in the world and looked upon the Woolworth Building as well as the Dome of St. Peter's. And it has been matured by overcoming a duality of experience that was both geographic and psychic—a divided family, the alternating influences of a Spanish father and a Spanish boyhood, and a Spanish mother and a New England boyhood.

Chambers closed out his days at Time Inc. with a series of brief historical Baedekers published in *Life* in 1947-48. He wrote on, among other subjects, "The Middle Ages," "The Glory of Venice," and "The Protestant Reformation." It was his turn at the public lectern manned variously by Adler, Barzun, Fadiman, and Trilling, all veterans like himself of Columbia's innovative Great Books courses. Chambers's *Life* essays were immensely popular, though he badly overshot his deadlines. He was distracted, I suspect, by certain events taking place in the House Committee on Un-American Activities. "The Tranquil Years," as Chambers fondly characterized his decade at *Time*, were in fact fraught with anxiety. He feared violent reprisal from his ex-comrades and was troubled by the faltering signals sent from Washington, which seemed curiously indifferent to Soviet infiltration. As early as September 2, 1939—ten days after Hitler and Stalin became blood brothers and the day after the Nazis invaded Poland—Chambers gave a thorough run-down on the Washington spy apparatus to Adolf A. Berle, Assistant Secretary of State. But nothing came of it. FBI interviewers visited Chambers's office in 1942 and again in 1945 and both times left convinced that everything he had to tell them was "history, hypothesis or deduction." Not until 1946 was there a glimmer of genuine interest: the Bureau had targeted Hiss, and agents alerted Chambers to stand by. On July 31, 1948, Elizabeth Bentley, "the Blonde Spy Queen," told HUAC a fanciful tale about Washington officials passing on secret documents to Soviet operatives, and two days later Chambers, who had begged the Committee not to summon him, was served with a subpoena. His vassalage at *Time* was over and his public trauma began.

Prophecy erupts in concentrated bursts, and the two-year paroxysm of writing *Witness* left Chambers drained. He started another book, but it kept changing shape; finally it became an albatross. He repeatedly assured Bennett Cerf, his publisher, that he was at work, and he was—contributing essays to *National Review* and polishing the reminiscences and meditations issued posthumously as *Cold Friday*. He preferred shorter forms. All the more remarkable that he saw *Witness* through to completion. In some respects, it was his most taxing ordeal. It was lightened, though, by moments of optimism. In December 1950 he informed David McDowell, his editor at Random House, that he had at last found a suitable opening line. He meant the first sentence, not of his foreword, "Letter to My Children," but of "Flight": "In 1937, I began, like Lazarus, the impossible return." Of course it was the example of another resurrection, Jonah's, that Chambers was fated to follow. For, like all true writers, he could not escape the burden of his eloquence.

6 In "Santayana, Poet of Dissolution," a review of *Persons and Places: The Backgrounds of My Life*; *The American Mercury*, March 1944.

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Hungering for eternity: Coleridge the poet

by Bruce Bawer

He was narcissistic, irresponsible, good-humored, impetuous, captivating, Machiavellian; he could be mendacious and arrogant one moment, shockingly frank and self-effacing the next. He underwent drastic swings from gloom to euphoria and back again, and more than once demonstrated his ability (in the words of his latest biographer) to "confess spiritual despair at midday; and dine out brilliantly at midnight." He truthfully called himself "a dreaming & therefore an indolent man," yet he was also a tireless hiker and mountain climber and a passionate, prolific writer (though not a productive poet) whose collected works fill more than two dozen capacious, closely printed volumes. He frequently expressed a powerful self-loathing, but rarely exhibited self-discipline. He had a genius for winning the friendship of intelligent and wealthy people, for making himself the beneficiary of their affection and largesse, and for disrupting their lives entirely; though he was supported, during most of his adult life, by a generous patron of the china-manufacturing Wedgwood family, he seems eternally to have been in debt, and habitually cadged money from friends (and, on at least one occasion, broke off correspondence in righteous indignation when a loan didn't materialize). He made a virtual career of planning new household arrangements, relocations, and ambitious literary projects, but was congenitally almost incapable of applying himself steadily to a long-term project. A comment, made in 1796 by his lifelong friend Charles Lamb, that "I grieve from my very soul to observe you in your plans of life, veering about from this hope to the other, & settling nowhere," might have been made, with no little justification, at nearly any time in the early and middle decades of his life. And this was the man who, as the English author Richard Holmes writes in his absorbing new biography, *Coleridge: Early Visions*, was seen by Dorothy Wordsworth as "a sort of incarnation of the Romantic poetic personality."[1]

What made Samuel Taylor Coleridge tick? Holmes's book—which chronicles the life of the poet-critic from 1772, the year of his birth, to 1804, when the bulk of his poetry had already been written and when his major critical works (and the worst years of his opium addiction) still lay before him—goes a long way toward answering that question. (Holmes, the author of an earlier Romantic biography, *Shelley: The Pursuit* [1974], plans a second and concluding volume entitled *Coleridge: Later Reflections*.) The book not only brings its subject vibrantly to life; it also puts into perspective earlier studies by Norman Fruman (whose 1971 book *Coleridge: The Damaged Archangel* focused upon the poet's plagiarism) and Molly Lefebure (whose 1974 *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Bondage of Opium* emphasized his drug dependence), and builds nicely

1 *Coleridge: Early Visions*, by Richard Holmes; Viking, 409 pages, $22.95.

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upon Oliver Doughty's dowdy *Perturbed Spirit: The Life and Personality of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (1981), which, while offering the fullest version yet of the life, placed an almost mindless emphasis on slackly rendered details of action and circumstance and paid too little heed to Coleridge's development as an artist and thinker. This was particularly unfortunate, for, as Thomas McFarland observed in a review of Doughty's book, "mental activity and biography are inseparable in any analysis of Coleridge."

Holmes's book—which might almost have been written in response to McFarland's observation—strikes an admirable balance between "mental activity and biography." So skillfully, indeed, does Holmes bring into focus the relations among Coleridge's writings, ideas, and way of life, convincingly pointing out influences and correlations every step of the way (and enabling the attentive reader to notice certain parallels and to come to certain conclusions for himself), that he obliges one, to a degree that perhaps no Coleridge biographer has done before, to confront serious questions regarding the nature, meaning, and moral import of the Romantic ethos. For Coleridge was, without question, the chief philosopher of the Romantic poets. Although he wrote almost all his prominent poems during the phase covered by Holmes's book (the years from 1772 to 1799 were identified by a nineteenth-century biographer, H. D. Traill, as Coleridge's "Poetical Period," as distinct from his "Critical" and "Metaphysical and Theological" Periods), and though his major prose work, the *Biographia Literaria*, would not appear until 1817, Holmes is correct in recognizing that Coleridge was, even during these early years of his writing career, a philosopher as much as a poet. His friend William Hazlitt described him as a man in whom "Poetry and Philosophy had met together," and Coleridge—who once asserted that while Wordsworth was "a great, a true Poet," he himself was "only a kind of Metaphysician"—would not have contested this characterization.

He came by his versatility honestly. Coleridge was the youngest of ten children of a Devonshire vicar and headmaster, the Reverend John Coleridge, whose literary corpus included Biblical commentary, a Hebrew edition of the Bible, a published sermon against the American War of Independence, a grammar textbook, a play, and contributions to the *Gentlemen's Magazine*. Coleridge was a spoiled, precocious, high-strung boy whose mind, thanks to his reading of fairy tales and the like, early became (in his own words) "habituated *to the Vast*"—a habituation, he argued, that a child must undergo in order to develop a love for "'the Great,' & 'the Whole.'" Coleridge would always claim to have fond memories of his supposedly gentle father, of the older brothers that he looked up to, of his beloved sister Nancy (who would die of consumption in 1791), and of the pastoral setting of his childhood (in "Frost at Midnight," he would write nostalgically of "my sweet birthplace, and the old church-tower"). His mother, however, was a different proposition: soon after his father's death in 1781, she enrolled her lastborn as a "charity boy" in the Christ's Hospital School in London, and during the next nine years invited him home for holidays only three or four times.

The young Coleridge found consolation in fellow students like Charles Lamb (who, smart and empathic, comes off better than anyone else in Holmes's biography), in volumes of neo-Platonic philosophy and Graveyard School poetry, and (especially) in the nature sonnets of the now largely forgotten William Bowles, whose style—"so tender and yet so manly, so natural and real"—made a strong impression on him. In later years, Wordsworth would paint a romantic picture of Coleridge as a solitary lad communing with the heavens from the roof of Christ's Hospital; Coleridge himself, in "Frost at Midnight," would insist that as a schoolboy he "saw naught lovely but the sky and stars." But Lamb would draw a different, less sentimental portrait of the young poet-to-be, remembering him as an uncommonly gregarious child who routinely captivated

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his peers with impromptu orations on a multiplicity of topics. Coleridge would spend much of his adult life haranguing, lecturing, sermonizing at anyone who would listen; to read about his formative years at Christ's Hospital is to get the impression that all this conversational activity began as a poignant attempt to win from his schoolmates a degree of the attention and affection that his father's death had taken from him.

At Cambridge—which he entered, in 1791, as a scholarship student—Coleridge earned a reputation for republican sympathies, Unitarianism, and idleness. During his third year there, he abruptly joined the army under the assumed name of Comberbache; a few weeks later, having come to appreciate the folly of his decision, he sent his brother George a manic, importunate missive, a sort of document to which the poet's friends and family would become quite accustomed over the years:

> I have been a fool even to madness . . . . My mind is illegible to myself—I am lost in the labyrinth, the trackless wilderness of my own bosom . . . . The shame and sorrow of those who loved me—the anguish of him, who protected me from my childhood upwards—the sore travail of her who bore me—intolerable Images of horror! They haunt my sleep—they enfever my Dreams!

Holmes's gloss is perfect:

> His new identity as Trooper Comberbache gave him, paradoxically, a chance to be himself. For the first time one can really hear the voice of the frantic young poet and intellectual, dramatising and over-dramatising himself with a lurid satisfaction that so frequently hovers on pure comedy. As so often in Coleridge's later life, the absurd disaster of his practical affairs seems almost a liberation of the spirit. His letter soars upwards out of the catastrophe it recounts, with something close to exultation. He makes the worst of everything, brilliantly.

Discharged from the army, Coleridge returned to Cambridge. Soon afterward he met, and found himself drawn to, an Oxonian (and future Poet Laureate) named Robert Southey, with whom he proceeded to contrive the so-called "Pantisocratic" scheme. Based on a mélange of Rousseau's naturalism, William Godwin's anarchism, and the associational psychology of David Hartley (all of which Coleridge would eventually repudiate), and inspired by the scientist Joseph Priestley's recent emigration to rural Pennsylvania, the basic idea was for the two young poets, along with several friends and dependents, to found a commune in America. But the plan was doomed to failure: Southey was too conventional to carry it through, and before long had married one Edith Fricker; Coleridge, meanwhile, accepting (for the nonce) the demise of the Pantisocratic dream, left Cambridge, wed Edith's sister Sara (to whom Southey had introduced him), and settled in Bristol.

There he published a short-lived political newspaper, the *Watchman*, and gave lectures on current events. He also produced his first collection of verse, *Poems on Various Subjects* (1796), a hodgepodge of turgid pseudo-Miltonic forays into politics and religion ("Monody on the Death of Chatterton," "Religious Musings"), and of stilted personal "effusions" derivative of Bowles, Edward Young, William Cowper, and other eighteenth-century poets. Coleridge himself recognized their failings: "my *Poetry* is crowded and sweats beneath a heavy burthen of Ideas and Imagery! It has seldom Ease." He had that right: the poems tend to be models of hackneyed rhetoric, crowded with upper-case abstractions (from Peace and Pleasure and Pity to Power and Pride and Poverty), with stylized tributes to fresh streams and fair maidens, and with "Zephyr's wings," "Pierian flowers," and other boiler-plate items from the standard eighteenth-century menu; their language is deeply artificial, and their emotion (even when genuine) rings hollow and false. Something of their characteristic matter and manner may be glimpsed in this passage from "Lines: On An Autumnal Evening":

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Dear native brook! where first young Poesy
Stared wildly-eager in her noontide dream!
Where blameless pleasures dimple Quiet's
cheek,
As water-lilies ripple thy slow stream!
Dear native haunts! where Virtue still is gay,
Where Friendship's fix'd star sheds a mellow'd
ray,
Where Love a crown of thornless roses wears,
Where soften'd Sorrow smiles within her tears;
And memory with a Vestal's chaste employ,
Unceasing feeds the lambent flame of joy!

The poem, like many a Romantic ode or sonnet, professes an esteem for nature; but the author hardly seems to *see* the natural forms around him. Here, and elsewhere in Coleridge's first collection, nature seems to be appreciated not for its real beauties, but for the storehouse of high-flown poetic clichés that are associated with it. In "To Fortune," another early poem of this ilk, Coleridge proclaims, "The rebel *Feeling* riots at my heart!"; too often, however, the problem with such early poems as these is that they represent a riot of bombast rather than an organized demonstration of feeling.

Some of the so-called effusions in *Poems* were promising. In a 1791 sonnet (never published during his lifetime) called "On Seeing a Youth Affectionately Welcomed By a Sister," the teenage Coleridge had written:

I too a sister had! too cruel death!
How sad Remembrance bids my bosom
heave!
Tranquil her soul, as sleeping Infant's breath;
Meek were her manners as a vernal Eve.
Knowledge, that frequent lifts the bloated
mind,
Gave her the treasure of a lowly breast . . .

And so forth, along the same stale lines. Now, in "To a Friend," composed in 1794 (and addressed to Lamb), Coleridge wrote:

I too a Sister *had*, an only Sister—
She lov'd me dearly, and I doted on her!
To her I pour'd forth all my puny sorrows
(As a sick Patient in a Nurse's arms)
And of the heart those hidden maladies
That e'en from Friendship's eye will shrink
asham'd.
O! I have wak'd at midnight, and have wept,
Because she was not!

Yes, the emotion here is perhaps too unrestrained, the poet too maudlin and self-pitying. But the poem represents a first step, at least, away from the contrived images and pumped-up language of its predecessor and toward the communication, in robust and natural language, of recognizably genuine feelings—"the essential passions of the heart," as Wordsworth would call them in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. The wisest response to *Poems* came from Lamb: "Cultivate simplicity, Coleridge, or rather, I should say, banish elaborateness."

Enter William Wordsworth. In 1797, the Coleridges moved to Stowey, only twenty miles from Wordsworth's home in Racedown. One day Coleridge hiked over, and before long he was effectively a part of the family. His friendship with William and his sister Dorothy—first at Racedown, and then at their Alfoxton cottage near Stowey, to which the Wordsworths soon relocated in order to be closer to their new friend—was unique. Even before becoming friends, Coleridge had called Wordsworth (whose major work had yet to be written) "the best poet of the age." Though Wordsworth was only two years his senior, Coleridge seems from the beginning to have been very aware of himself as a sort of junior partner; if he was a virtuoso in the art of using people, in his dealings with Wordsworth he allowed himself to be used—as editor, adviser, and all-around acolyte—to a truly phenomenal degree. Holmes puts his finger on one of the keys to their friendship:

> Coleridge would give Wordsworth unstinting critical admiration for his work, and greatly influence its direction; while the Wordsworths would support Coleridge emotionally, by confirming his fluctuating and uncertain sense of his own identity and genius. Wordsworth

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> wanted above all else to be a great poet, and Coleridge told him he was; Coleridge wanted above all else to be poetically wonderful and intellectually inspiring, and the Wordsworths showed him this was true. Each gave the other his ideal self; it was the essence of Romantic friendship.

Well, for a time, anyway. Coleridge may also have been attracted to Wordsworth because the latter, with his natural philosophy—his unwavering view of man and nature as interacting elements in a thoroughly harmonious universal system—represented a rare combination of poet, philosopher, and priest. Surely nothing could have appealed more to a vicar's son who (in Lamb's words) "hungered for eternity" and (as Pater wrote) was always desperate to "apprehend the absolute." Then, too, there was the allure of opposite personalities: it is not hard to picture Coleridge, the restless social animal, being drawn to Wordsworth's "unvexed quietness of heart" (Pater again), or to imagine Coleridge, the anxious, mercurial devourer of other men's books and philosophies, being fascinated by Wordsworth's "steadily accumulating moral certainties" (Holmes). "Intellectually," Holmes writes, "Coleridge was a huge river [and, it should be added, an exceptionally meandering one, with more than its share of eddies, rapids, and rip tides]; while Wordsworth was a mighty rock."

Whatever the case—and it should not be overlooked that they had important things in common, too, among them Cambridge, nature, the early loss of a father, and a background of sympathy for the French Revolution—Coleridge and Wordsworth were attracted to each other strongly enough to become not only friends but collaborators. Indeed, just as Coleridge and Southey had put their heads together and come up with Pantisocracy, so Coleridge and Wordsworth hatched an equally ambitious plan for a joint publication that would map out new directions for English verse. Their respective poetic strategies, they decided, would complement each other: while Coleridge brought the supernatural down to earth, giving it (in his words) "a human nature and a semblance of truth," Wordsworth would "give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and . . . excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us."

The book that resulted, *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), proved, of course, to be one of the pivotal volumes of verse in English literary history, a first shot in the rebellion against eighteenth-century neoclassicism. Because Wordsworth proved to be the more productive of the two, however, and because Coleridge allowed him to exercise editorial control, nineteen of the twenty-three poems included were Wordsworth's. Nor did Coleridge's four contributions do him adequate justice: two, "The Foster-Mother's Tale" and "The Dungeon," were melodramatic excerpts from his pedestrian verse tragedy *Osorio*; a third was "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," which, though it was to become deservedly celebrated, may fairly be said, with "Christabel" and the ubiquitous "Kubla Khan," to have overshadowed some of Coleridge's less exotic but equally masterly works. Placed alongside Wordsworth's well-bred, quietly pensive contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*, these three poems cannot but have suggested, to many of his contemporaries, that Coleridge's poetic gift, though substantial, was also unappealingly weird, gloomy, and narrow of range. This seems, in any case, to have been Wordsworth's view: by all indications, he never really cared much for poems like "The Ancient Mariner," "Kubla Khan," and "Christabel"—the very poems with which, thanks largely to *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge's name has become most widely identified, and which Harold Bloom, in *The Visionary Company*, categorizes as Coleridge's poems of "Natural Magic."

By contrast, Coleridge's remaining poem in *Lyrical Ballads*, "The Nightingale," was one of his so-called conversation poems, a sequence that Holmes rightly describes as "perhaps his finest achievement." These

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poems tend to be more controlled, poised, harmonious, and persuasive than the "magical" poems; their direct, compassionate treatment of familiar feelings and experiences, and their celebration of nature as a moral and spiritual teacher, owe much to Wordsworth's influence, and their specific form and voice helped, in turn, to inspire many of the finest of Wordsworth's shorter poems, among them "Tintern Abbey." Yet though several of Coleridge's most affecting conversation poems had been written by the time *Lyrical Ballads* appeared (the two best ones, "Frost at Midnight" and "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," both having been produced during his so-called *annus mirabilis* of 1797-98), none of them was included in the book. This is a pity, for to read the closing lines of "This Lime-Tree Bower" (1797) is to see a poet transformed—a poet whose proclivity for the mechanical manipulation of stock natural images has been supplanted by a newly responsive heart and observant eye:

> Nor in this bower,
> This little lime-tree bower, have I not mark'd
> Much that has soothed me. Pale beneath
> the blaze
> Hung the transparent foliage; and I watch'd
> Some broad and sunny leaf, and lov'd to see
> The shadow of the leaf and stem above
> Dappling its sunshine! And that walnut-tree
> Was richly ting'd, and a deep radiance lay
> Full on the ancient ivy, which usurps
> Those fronting elms, and now, with blackest
> mass
> Makes their dark branches gleam a lighter
> hue
> Through the late twilight: and though now
> the bat
> Wheels silent by, and not a swallow twitters,
> Yet still the solitary humble-bee
> Sings in the bean-flower! Henceforth I
> shall know
> That Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure;
> No plot so narrow, be but Nature there,
> No waste so vacant, but may well employ
> Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart
> Awake to Love and Beauty! and sometimes
> 'Tis well to be bereft of promis'd good,
> That we may lift the soul, and contemplate
> With lively joy the joys we cannot share.
> My gentle-hearted Charles! when the last rook
> Beat its straight path along the dusky air
> Homewards, I blest it! deeming its black wing
> (Now a dim speck, now vanishing in light)
> Had cross'd the mighty Orb's dilated glory,
> While thou stood'st gazing; or, when all
> was still,
> Flew creeking o'er thy head, and had a charm
> For thee, my gentle-hearted Charles, to whom
> No sound is dissonant which tells of Life.

After the pompous falsity of the passage from "Lines: On an Autumnal Evening," these graceful, unaffected lines are as fresh as a spring shower; the delicacy and meticulousness of Coleridge's description, his sheer lack of hurry, seem to reflect a sincere absorption in his natural surroundings. The same characteristics distinguish "Frost at Midnight," perhaps the loveliest and most flawlessly shaped of all Coleridge's poems. Here is its first third or so:

> The Frost performs its secret ministry,
> Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry
> Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before.
> The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
> Have left me to that solitude, which suits
> Abstruser musings: save that at my side
> My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.
> 'Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs
> And vexes meditation with its strange
> And extreme silentness. Sea, hill, and wood,
> This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood,
> With all the numberless goings-on of life,
> Inaudible as dreams! the thin blue flame
> Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not:
> Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,
> Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.
> Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
> Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
> Making it a companionable form,
> Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling
> Spirit
> By its own moods interprets, everywhere
> Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
> And makes a toy of Thought.

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The poem captures a quiet interlude in such a way that one can almost hear the poet breathing, almost feel the moments passing. The texture, the details, are precisely right, and the small gentle shifts in state of mind are perfectly handled: there is no sense of straining, no sense of an attempt to bend the material to any purposes beyond itself, to force upon the reader the idea of communion with nature; every thought seems to flow naturally out of the situation. It is, moreover, an ordinary situation, and Coleridge's simple but decorous language at once underlines its ordinariness and affirms its dignity and importance (the reiteration of the phrase "sea, hill, and wood," for instance, invokes the idea of recurrence, of dailiness, underlining the fact that this is the sort of thing that could happen to anyone, on any day); profound feelings, the poet seems to be saying, *can* arise from such mundane circumstances, and this is the great wonder of life. So successful is he at evoking the setting and his state of consciousness that by the time he comes around to describing the film fluttering on the grate as a "companionable form," the reader accepts it without question. There is a kind of faith here, and one finds nothing forced, fraudulent, or sentimental in its expression; it is, indeed, the depth of this faith that makes the modest incident from which it arises deserving of poetic treatment.

Convincing though this poem may be, however, Coleridge's devotion to such quiet moments of natural communion—to nature, as it were, in its more serene, less sensational manifestations—sometimes seems more of a pose, a conceit, than Wordsworth's. In a typical notebook entry, Coleridge declares his wish to "glide down the rivulet of quiet Life, a Trout!" Perhaps he meant this sincerely, or thought he did; but the very upper-case letters and exclamation point appear to belie his profession of enthusiasm for a quiet life. Hazlitt neatly underscores the distinction between the two nature-loving poets: "Coleridge has told me that he himself liked to compose in walking over uneven ground, or breaking through the straggling branches of a copse-wood; whereas Wordsworth always wrote (if he could) walking up and down a straight gravel-walk." It is interesting how these divergent tastes reflect the broader differences between the two men—between Coleridge, whose whole biography reads like the journal of an excursion over very bumpy ground, a constant search for branches to break through—and Wordsworth, who walked a straighter, smoother path, seeking and achieving a tranquil, orderly passage among the trees and flowers.

Whether his affection for it was genuine or not, however, Coleridge was unable to endure nature at its most tranquil for very long. Shortly after the birth of his eldest child, Hartley, he wrote to a friend that "I am anxious that my children should be bred up from earliest infancy in the simplicity of peasants," and declared his determination to "retire once for all and utterly from cities and towns." But though his children were indeed brought up mostly in the countryside, their upbringing was left almost entirely to Sara; Coleridge, for his part, was too restless (and too eager to have a sophisticated audience for his declamations on the joys of rustic living) to spend all his time in bucolic settings. "Hell is a city much like London," Shelley wrote, and (sonnets on Westminster Bridge notwithstanding) Wordsworth probably would have agreed; but not Coleridge, who spent the last several—and, apparently, the most content—years of his life in the metropolis.

To be sure, Coleridge's view of nature could be ingenuous. He found his wife's childbirth pains inexplicable because "[o]ther pains are only friendly admonitions that we are not acting as Nature requires—but here are pains most horrible in consequence of having obeyed Nature." Yet he found it easier than Wordsworth to admit into his poetry a recognition of the grotesque and brutal aspects of the natural world. And by the time of *Biographia Literaria* (1817), he would call into question the concept of natural piety, arguing that

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"for the human soul to prosper in rustic life, a certain vantage-ground is pre-requisite. It is not every man that is likely to be improved by a country life or by country labors. Education, or original sensibility, or both, must pre-exist if the changes, forms and incidents of nature are to prove a sufficient stimulant."

Likewise, in his magnificent "Dejection: An Ode" (1802), Coleridge articulated a conception of nature that is not quite congruent with Wordsworth's. On a placid evening of a sort that once "sent my soul abroad," the poem's speaker recognizes that his "stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief" over a lady friend prevents him from experiencing the beauty of the night, and that, therefore, it is not nature that teaches the soul about beauty, but the human soul—which some power beyond the "outward forms" of moon and clouds has endowed with a "shaping spirit of Imagination"—that is (under certain psychological circumstances) able to perceive nature's "outward forms" as beautiful. Writes Coleridge:

> I may not hope from outward forms to win
> The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.
>
> O Lady! we receive but what we give,
> And in our life alone does Nature live:
> Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud!
> And would we aught behold, of higher worth,
> Than that inanimate cold world allowed
> To the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd,
> Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth
> A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
> Enveloping the Earth—
> And from the soul itself must there be sent
> A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,
> Of all sweet sounds the life and element!

The heresy here, from a Wordsworthian perspective, is that Coleridge associates the truly valuable properties of nature entirely with the human mind, and not with the moon and clouds *per se*. As Holmes observes, "Dejection" forms a sort of dialogue with Wordsworth's "Immortality" ode "about the nature of human hope and creativity"; and it must be said that Coleridge's ode, though it struggles rather more perceptibly than Wordsworth's to remain at its high level of majesty and authority, is ultimately a more honest work.

If all this seems to come down to religion, it does: while Wordsworth generally appeared to need no religion but nature, Coleridge declared himself unequivocally to be a Christian, and (as "Frost at Midnight" attests) revered the natural world not for itself but, rather, as a manifestation of the Word, a form of divine revelation. This is not to imply that Coleridge's religious ideas were fixed: if in his youth he left the Anglican Church of his boyhood and briefly considered himself a Unitarian (even going so far, in 1798, as to accept a ministry at Shrewsbury), he later reverted to his vicar father's foursquare Trinitarianism and, in 1833, bluntly informed the Unitarian Ralph Waldo Emerson that his religion was "quackery." Whether he worshipped the One or the Three-in-One, however, religion was always important to Coleridge, who wrote in 1798 that his principal motive for seeking philosophical knowledge and poetic fame was to be able "to defend Religion ably."

And perhaps Coleridge sincerely considered himself a good Christian. But his personal character makes him one of the poorest advertisements for the faith that one could wish; his un-Christian treatment of his wife, children, and benefactors seems to suggest that too often ideas—moral ideas included—were *only* ideas to him. Some of his best poems, to be sure, contain tender glimpses of his children, one of the earliest being "Sonnet: To a Friend Who Asked, How I Felt When the Nurse First Presented My Infant to Me" (1796):

> Charles! my slow heart was only sad, when first
> I scann'd that face of feeble infancy:
> For dimly on my thoughtful spirit burst
> All I had been, and all my child might be!
> But when I saw it on its mother's arm,

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> And hanging at her bosom (she the while
> Bent o'er its features with a tearful smile)
> Then I was thrill'd and melted, and most
> warm
> Impress'd a father's kiss: and all beguil'd
> Of dark remembrance and presageful fear,
> I seem'd to see an angel-form appear—
> 'Twas even thine, belovéd woman mild!
> So for the mother's sake the child was
> dear,
> And dearer was the mother for the child.

But the tenderness recorded in such poems for all eternity was, in real life, quite ephemeral. Dorothy Wordsworth, after her first meeting with Coleridge, described him as "a wonderful man" whose "conversation teems with soul, mind and spirit," and who, "like William, interests himself so much about every little trifle"; but it is distressing to see how eager this "wonderful man" was to leave his family and to spend extended periods of time with the Wordsworths, distressing to see how much less sensitive he could be to his wife's feelings and to his children's needs than to the clouds, stars, and sundry natural "trifles" in which he showed such interest. He was a master of idealism at a distance: the further he travelled from his wife and children, the more effusively he declared his devotion in his letters; if he didn't sentimentalize nature as much as Wordsworth did, he certainly sentimentalized his family expertly.

Perhaps no anecdote better illustrates Coleridge's irresponsibility in this regard than the story of his 1798 trip to Germany. Though it was supposed to be a three-month tour, he ended up staying away from home for ten months, during which time he roamed Germany's hills and valleys, met its academics, studied its language, and read its philosophy. Though some biographers have suggested that he did not really accomplish much on this trip, Holmes—while admitting that Coleridge's studies in Germany were characteristically haphazard and undisciplined—convincingly argues that the sojourn had an extensive influence on his later critical writings. As Holmes writes,

> His whole notion of "criticism"—of the application of philosophic principles to imaginative literature—was to be European rather than English; and the fundamental importance which he gave to religious and metaphysical ideas, in later controversies over both literature and politics, profoundly reflects the atmosphere of Romantic reaction and mysticism which was then spreading throughout the universities of Germany—at Göttingen, at Jena, at Leipzig.

Upon receiving word that his infant son Berkeley was ill, Coleridge replied with a letter whose rhetoric (even considering the conventions of eighteenth-century personal correspondence) seems facile, exorbitant: "O my babies!—Absence makes it painful to be a Father!—My Wife, believe and know that I pant to be home & with you." Upon receiving word of the child's death, however, Coleridge's first thought was not to rush home, but to dispatch a packet of ontological musings to Poole (who was helping to watch after his family): "My Baby has not lived in vain . . . . It was *life!*—it was a particle of *Being*—it was *Power!*—& *how could* it perish—?" When, two days later, Coleridge got around to writing Sara, he sent along an epitaph which, he admitted, he had composed several weeks earlier for a friend's child; that done, he set off on an extended walking tour of the Harz Mountains, lingered a few more weeks at Göttingen, climbed the Brocken (for a second time), walked to Brunswick, spent several days at the Wolfenbutten library, and walked to Helmstadt (where he examined paintings and manuscripts and socialized with the professoriate). He finally made it back to Stowey at the end of July 1799—six full months after Berkeley's death.

Holmes may be right in seeing this behavior, which on the surface looks staggeringly callous, as "a form of self-defence, or displaced guilt." But Coleridge's seemingly cavalier attitude is altogether too much of a piece with his usual childlike inability to take anyone else's feelings very seriously for very long, his general tendency

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to treat everything as an occasion for self-dramatization. (It is ironic, in this connection, that the child's name was Berkeley, for Coleridge's reaction to his loss strikes one almost as an extreme instance of Berkeleyan subjectivism.) In 1802, for instance, when Sara became pregnant for the first time since Berkeley's death, Coleridge was quick to accept the invitation of his mortally ill patron Tom Wedgwood to travel with him to France.

The chronic moral delinquency illustrated by such anecdotes would seem to strike at the heart of the whole Romantic sensibility—and how could it not? For it is a sensibility, after all, that Coleridge, in the eyes of Dorothy Wordsworth, virtually embodied. This is not to suggest that a poet's life is anyone's business but his own, or that it should be seen, in ordinary circumstances, as having a bearing on the intrinsic value of his work. But when the very message of a given poet's work is that his way of understanding the world has brought him to a level of moral enlightenment that few, if any, other poets have occupied, one is not only permitted, I should think, but obliged to ask whether such a claim is truly justified. The assertion of one of Coleridge's biographers, Hugh I'Anson Fausset, to the effect that Coleridge was "a poet to whom human flesh was indeed a vapour," seems amply justified, though one would tend to revise the observation slightly: Coleridge, who could expostulate *ad infinitum* about his own fleshly torments, was a poet to whom *other* people's flesh was a vapor.

And yet, paradoxically, other people could mean a great deal to him. Reading Holmes's biography, one has the impression that a major reason for Coleridge's German junket, and for his extremely close attachments to men like Southey and Wordsworth, was not merely that he was drawn (as Holmes argues) to their "character and willpower," or that (as was clearly the case with Wordsworth) he venerated their talent, but that there was at the center of his character an innate moral imperative to humble himself before men whom he perceived as (in some way) his betters; his apparent solipsism, in other words, may well have concealed an ego so infirm that it needed, for its own survival, to affix itself to one that was steadier and stronger. Godwin observed that Coleridge "always longed to know some man whom he might look up to, by that means to increase his sentiment of the importance of our common nature: every man knows himself to be little." Coleridge himself wrote nostalgically about his friend Tom Poole that

> I used to feel myself more at home in his great windy Parlour, than in my own cottage. We were well suited for each other—my animal Spirits corrected his inclinations and melancholy; and there was some thing both in his understanding & in his affection so healthy & manly, that my mind freshened in his company, and my ideas & habits of thinking acquired day after day more of substance & reality.

Similarly, when invited by Wedgwood to accompany him to France, Coleridge jumped at the opportunity, writing that "[i]f only I shall have been any Comfort, any Alleviation, to you—I shall feel myself at ease."

But the man to whom he most conspicuously subordinated himself was, of course, Wordsworth. If he was constitutionally incapable of fulfilling the most rudimentary obligations to his family (Sara continued to depend on Poole and Southey for the rest of her life), he devoted himself to "his God, Wordsworth" (as Lamb sardonically put it) far beyond the call of comradely duty. Among other things, after planting in Wordsworth's mind the idea of writing the *Prelude*, his epic poem of "the growth of a poet's mind," Coleridge cast aside his own epic ambitions in order to assist Wordsworth during the poem's composition. Precisely what psychological mechanism was at work here, no one can know for certain; but one cannot help thinking that Coleridge's need for the approving, authoritative company of such a man as Wordsworth must have had more than a bit to do with Cole-

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ridge's early sense of subordination to his older brothers, his sudden loss of his father, and his long-lost, abruptly terminated rural childhood. If his father had been a vicar, Wordsworth became for him a high priest of Romanticism; no poem makes this clearer than "To William Wordsworth" (1807), Coleridge's last important poem, which he wrote after hearing for the first time the whole of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, and in which he celebrates Wordsworth as a "Friend of the wise! and Teacher of the Good!" whose "Lay / More than historic" tells all that may be told "Of the foundations and the building up / Of a Human Spirit."

If he sought to attach himself to certain men, Coleridge also found himself strongly attracted to the women to whom they introduced him. The pattern is distinct, if its significance is ambiguous: as Southey had introduced him to the Fricker girls—one of whom Southey took as his fiancée, and another of whom Coleridge subsequently wed—so when Wordsworth introduced him in 1799 to another family of girls, the Hutchinsons, one of whom, Mary, was soon to marry Wordsworth, Coleridge promptly became infatuated with her sister Sara (whom he called Asra, partly to distinguish her from his wife). During the next several years, he left his family whenever possible in order to dally shamelessly with her; once in 1801, for instance, he spent ten days with her and Mary on the Yorkshire coast, where (as "treatment" for a swollen knee) he spent his time swimming, horseback riding, and being "caressed and cuddled" by both sisters. Holmes writes of the "extraordinary intimacy and innocence" of this interlude and notes how childlike it was, how desperately Coleridge seems to have wanted to be "maternally fed and caressed."

Given the way Coleridge's mother had treated him after his father's death, of course, this sort of yearning on his part is completely understandable; yet, ardent though his attraction to Asra plainly was, both of them seem to have been unwilling to acknowledge its sexual element. In his journal he insisted that his feeling for her was "brotherly," and in a poem he addresses her as "Sister & Friend of my devoutest Choice." One might argue that this declaration of brotherly amity was motivated by a wistful memory of his closeness to his own late sister or by envy for Wordsworth's relationship with Dorothy; or one might contend, on the other hand, that both Coleridge's avowal of fraternal affection for Asra and Wordsworth's anomalous bond with Dorothy were manifestations of a shared sensibility that, while proclaiming its unprecedented intimacy with nature, was intent on lying to itself about certain other kinds of intimacy which were very much a part of nature. Even as conventional morality, in other words, made it impossible for Wordsworth or Coleridge to believe that incest or adultery could be anything but wrong, their Romantic notions regarding the purity of their own natural impulses compelled them to delude themselves into believing that what they felt for Dorothy and Asra, respectively, was nothing more than brotherly fondness. As Holmes suggests, Coleridge's inability to reconcile his strong adulterous passion for Asra with Romantic ideas about natural innocence may well have made it hard for him to carry on as a foursquare Romantic poet—a scenario that may help to explain why, after 1802 or so, his poetic output (which had never been copious) diminished to a trickle.

But Coleridge's virtual abandonment of poetry may also be plausibly traced to the 1800 publication of the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. First, Wordsworth rejected "Christabel," which Coleridge had composed expressly for inclusion in the new edition; then Wordsworth included in his famous preface to the second edition an incredibly patronizing passage about "The Ancient Mariner" that Coleridge did not even see until it was already in print. Given his insecurity, his profound trust in and affection for Wordsworth, and his near-reverence for the older poet's work and opinions, these happenings, as much as his anguish over Asra, may well have been enough to drive Coleridge from poetry. In

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any case, it is plain that by the time of the book's publication he had lost virtually all proprietary feelings about it, identifying it in a letter as "his [i.e., Wordsworth's] Lyrical Ballads," and informing Godwin that he had "altogether abandoned" poetry, "being convinced that I never had the essentials of poetic Genius, & that I mistook a strong desire for original power." Patently, it was Wordsworth's denigration of his work that brought about this surprising new posture.

It seems relevant that it wasn't until after this ego-deflating affair that Coleridge truly came into his own as a plagiarist—an activity whose definitive account has been provided by Norman Fruman in *Coleridge: The Damaged Archangel*. (Lamb, in a memorial essay on his friend, had called him as "an Archangel, a little damaged.") Holmes, who doesn't dwell on the subject, says of Coleridge's plagiarism that "[i]f psychologically it was a form of kleptomania, then intellectually it was a form of smuggling valuables across a closed border." Given his Romantic views, however, and especially his enthusiasm for "'the Great' & 'the Whole'" (in the *Biographia*, he admiringly quotes Jeremy Taylor: "he to whom all things are one, who draweth all things to one, and seeth all things in one, may enjoy true peace and rest of spirit"), Coleridge may well have excused these crimes to himself on the grounds that they were not, transcendentally speaking, crimes at all, since the products of any human mind belong, in the highest and finest sense, to all human minds. This seems, at least, to be a corollary of Hartley's associational theories as Coleridge understood them: "according to [Hartley's] hypothesis," Coleridge writes in the *Biographia*,

> the disquisition to which I am at present soliciting the reader's attention may be as truly said to be written by St. Paul's church as by *me* . . . . external causes stand themselves in interdependent connection with every thing that exists or has existed. Thus the whole universe cooperates to produce the minutest stroke of every letter, save only that I myself, and I alone, have nothing to do with it, but merely the causeless and effortless beholding of it when it is done.

Yes, Coleridge rejects these theories in the *Biographia*, but in his younger years he had embraced them (to the extent of naming his son Hartley); and one wonders whether the same deep-seated transcendental disposition that first drew him to Hartley also made it possible for him to excuse to himself his plagiarism, not to mention his ready acceptance of money from admirers, his guiltless abandonment of his family to the care of friends, and his relinquishment of his own poetry-writing in order to assist Wordsworth with the *Prelude*.

Holmes concludes *Coleridge: Early Visions* at an appropriate moment. In 1804, having within the previous three or four years written little poetry, suffered from myriad ailments, and become a confirmed opium addict, Coleridge left England for yet another extended stay on the Continent, receiving prior to his departure a solicitous send-off from the scientist Humphry Davy:

> You must not live much longer without giving to *all men* the *proof of power*, which those who know you feel in admiration. Perhaps at a distance from the applauding and censuring murmurs of the world, you will be best able to execute those great works which are justly expected from you; you are to be the historian of the Philosophy of feeling.—Do not in any way dissipate your noble nature.

Admirers of *Biographia Literaria* may find these lines prophetic. For better or worse, it was not poetry but prose that lay in Coleridge's future; having forsaken verse, he set about applying himself to the study of philosophy, his goal being to discover in metaphysics the unifying principle that he apparently felt he had failed to locate in poetry. "If I do not greatly delude myself," he had written to Poole in 1801,

> I have not only completely extricated the notions of Time, and Space; but have over-

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> thrown the doctrines of Association, as taught by Hartley, and with it all the irreligious metaphysics of modern Infidels—especially, the doctrine of Necessity.—This I have *done*; but I trust, that I am about to do more—namely, that I shall be able to evolve all the five senses, that is, to deduce them from *one sense* & to state their growth, & the causes of their difference—& in this evolvement to solve the process of Life & Consciousness.

Alas, he couldn't even solve his opium problem: after his separation from Sara in 1807, his addiction grew steadily worse, reaching its peak sometime between 1813 and 1816, at which time he placed himself in the care—and took up residence in the London home—of an apothecary named James Gillman. Coleridge was supposed to remain with the Gillman family for a few weeks, but ended up staying for eighteen years. The Gillman *ménage* was the perfect situation for him: it provided him with a good friend and an affectionate family while imposing absolutely no domestic responsibilities.

Meanwhile the works poured forth: lay sermons; lectures on philosophy and Shakespeare; writings on logic; a journal called *The Friend* (1809-10) that was ubiquitously denounced as boring. If, as a rule, the chief virtue of Coleridge's prose is its conversational vitality—its richness of personality, its fervor, its natural rhythms—its chief drawback is that it suffers, too often and too grievously, from the defects of conversation: imprecision, repetitiousness, lack of direction. If the young Coleridge loved to pontificate about politics and religion, it was (one has the impression) as much because he loved to talk, and because talk fortified his self-esteem, as because he had opinions on these subjects; likewise, if the post-"Poetical Period" Coleridge went in heavily for lectures, sermons, and the like (an entire volume of the beautiful Bollingen Edition of his *Collected Works* consists of his "Table Talk"), he may well have been acting out of a renewed need to bolster his ego in the wake of his perceived failure as a poet.

For better or worse, in any event, Coleridge's weightiest prose work of all is notable largely for its chattiness. No one had ever written anything quite like *Biographia Literaria*. It wasn't so much that Coleridge said anything new (although, of course, he said a great deal that was new, providing in its pages a thorough account and an astute defense of the Romantic approach to poetry): it was the way he said it, the way he broke all the established rules of criticism, crossing and recrossing the borders of life and art; it was, finally, the outrageously frank way he talked about himself. Wordsworth's poetry may or may not read, as the "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" insists, as if it is written in the "language of a man speaking to men"; but *Biographia Literaria* makes one feel exactly as if one is sitting in a tavern with Coleridge, listening to him drop names, play the celebrated crank, settle old scores, and spin his frequently tiresome, borderline paranoid, and intermittently brilliant theories about life, poetry, and the mind of man. The book is an extraordinary cross between Rousseau's *Confessions*, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

One looks forward to Holmes's examination of the older Coleridge in *Later Reflections*. It can already be said, however, that in *Early Visions* he has written the most valuable extant biographical study of Coleridge's poetry-writing years. If the book is more than usually engrossing, it is because Holmes recognizes that the story of S.T.C. (as he was known to kith and kin) is essentially that of a mind, a prodigious, eclectic, and enigmatic mind whose ability to touch a reader's sensibilities one minute and to infuriate him the next compels one to try to understand what made this particular organism work the way it did. Coleridge was a man of many parts if there ever was one, traces of whose complex legacy can be discerned in everything from the work of a T. S. Eliot to the play of an Allen Ginsberg; and on finishing Holmes's book, which so splendidly integrates its account of the poet's intellectual, artistic, and spiritual growth into the story of his personal exploits, one cannot help feeling that one has come at least somewhat closer to understanding how those parts fit together.

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Opera and politics
by Samuel Lipman

At the beginning of January I was invited to take part in a panel discussion at the annual meeting of Opera America, the advocacy and service association of opera companies, large and small, in the United States and Canada. This meeting, a several-day affair, was to be held at the end of that same month in Washington, D.C., scarcely a stone's throw from the headquarters of the National Endowment for the Arts, the center of so much public controversy in recent months over the proprieties of federal arts funding.

Both because of the present climate for public support and because of wider trends in opera today, the panel to which I was invited promised to be particularly interesting. On it there was to appear the controversial stage director Peter Sellars, much noticed in the more progressive precincts of the opera world for his production of John Adams's *Nixon in China* (1987), and for his audacious updatings of Mozart operas at the Pepsico Summerfare festival at the State University of New York at Purchase, as well as a similar treatment of Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser* at the Chicago Lyric Opera a season ago. There were to be three other members of the panel: Christopher Hunt, the guiding genius of Pepsico Summerfare from 1984 until its dissolution last year; the black composer Anthony Davis, whose opera *X*, a setting of the life of Malcolm X, was much talked about on its production in the 1986 season at the New York City Center Opera; and finally my friend and teacher (at Juilliard some three decades ago) Hugo Weisgall, the composer of the classic American modernist opera (based on Pirandello) *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1958), who is now engaged in writing a large work based on Racine's *Esther* for the San Francisco Opera. The moderator of the panel was to be David Gockley, the current President of Opera America, and for many years now the General Director of Houston Grand Opera, a company much praised for its willingness to do contemporary works and for its presentation of both operas and old Broadway musicals.

As interesting as the makeup of the panel was the proposed subject for discussion: "Opera as a Vehicle for Social Commentary or Activism in Today's Society." Considered in the light of the NEA's recent troubles, this subject seemed to speak directly to the concerns of an arts world shaken by the Serrano, Mapplethorpe, and Artists Space grants; much of the defense of the NEA, after all, had been mounted not just in support of artistic freedom, but of the idea of art as being by its nature provocative, shocking, and offensive.

As might have been guessed, I had been invited, in the light of my lack of enthusiasm for avant-garde music theater compositions and operatic productions, to provide a suitable foil for Mr. Sellars. Unfortunately, in the event there was to be no confrontation with Mr. Sellars, for this busy man was

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suddenly prevented by the press of work in Los Angeles from appearing at the panel. His place was taken by the operatic stage director Leon Major.

Messrs. Hunt, Weisgall, and Davis spoke before me, Mr. Major after. I can do no more than summarize their contributions here. Mr. Hunt began by saying that we live in an age of accustomed mediocrity. Our duty is to change society. In Europe, activism in opera (and in art in general) is taken for granted; here, he avowed, "the bland [are] leading the bland." We must get rid of "old dead audience expectations" and stress in the classics "what speaks to us now." According to Mr. Hunt, all art is political; art either seeks change or is a propagandist for the *status quo*. For Mr. Weisgall, the question posed to the panel was meaningless: what counted was not an *a priori* discussion of what opera should do, but the quality of the work—and *that* could be demonstrated only in production. For Mr. Davis, there was now a new sense of opera, a sense of remembering, as he had tried to do in *X*, the forgotten historical record of the multicultural contributions to American life and art. Viewed in this way, it was clear that to ignore or demean popular culture was to be in opposition to our American selves. For his part, Mr. Major stated that opera should not be an event in the lifestyle of the rich. We must realize that our past had not just been influenced by Europe, but also by Africa and Asia; it was in these latter directions that we must look for the future of opera.

As for my own contribution to the panel, I spoke from notes, not a written-out text, and in preparing what follows I have relied on a transcript made from an audio tape furnished by National Public Radio.[1] My only modifications have been to smooth out syntactical infelicities and to supply necessary (albeit limited) explanatory material. I have made an exception to this rule only in pulling into the printed version responses prompted by the lengthy question-and-answer period which followed our opening remarks. Here, then, are my remarks to the Opera America panel.

When I was coming here today on the plane, I thought that I really wanted to begin with the old story of the Finnish composer Sibelius, who said that he preferred the company of bankers to the company of musicians, because musicians only wanted to talk about money.

It seemed to me as I was flying in on the Trump Shuttle that the 1980s had been the decade of our talking only about money whenever we discussed the arts. It seemed to me that now that we're in the 1990s, we've seen an enormous shift from money to politics; what's being talked about now in the arts is nothing more nor less than politics. Then of course I got here to Level Three of the J. W. Marriott Hotel, and I saw that Opera America is sharing the floor with the National Council of Savings Institutions. It occurred to me that we really have to ask ourselves whether opera is in a better situation than the savings and loan business. It certainly can't be in a worse position.

On my own analysis, discussions such as the one assigned to us today should begin by making clear our own personal definitions of what opera is. For me, opera is music that sets words to be staged. I put music first because I think that what makes opera a different kind of staged words—different, that is, from theater—is music. And the power of music in opera is such that at its best it has the power to become more important than the words, to become more important than the theater that surrounds and clothes the words. And when it becomes more important than the words and the theater, we call it opera.

Let's stay with the words for a moment, because the primary question that was assigned to us today—"Is it appropriate that opera serve as a vehicle for social commen-

1 It should be mentioned here that the NPR tape of the entire panel proceedings was used as the basis for a feature broadcast by NPR on January 31. In this feature, much emphasis was properly placed on the element of confrontation between Messrs. Hunt and Davis and myself.

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tary or as an exemplar or call to activism?"—deals entirely with words, that is, with subject matter. The comments we've heard so far, though they haven't always been about any particular subject matter, have said that subject matter is a good thing. Well, it seems to me that what opera deals with are the great and timeless oppositions of life. You all know about them: love and jealousy; loyalty and treachery; devotion and hatred; the individual and the family; the nation and the world; and what used to be called—and what I shall still call—God and man. And of course the prime subject, the greatest subject of opera, is vengeance and reconciliation.

The organizers of this panel have given us for our consideration a whole list of social issues that opera may possibly deal with. The list begins with the individual versus society. Then it goes on to multicultural and multiracial society, the fate of the planet, use and abuse of technology, distribution of wealth, AIDS, the homeless, gender, abuses of power, and censorship. Well, my guess is that these questions will only have importance for opera if they can be used in two contexts. One context is, of course, the context of these great issues of life that I've read out to you. If the issues of the environment, the homeless, of AIDS, gender, cannot be related to questions of love and hatred, vengeance and betrayal, the individual and the family, they won't work as opera, and you will end up with no more than yet another empty version of socialist realism.

The other requirement for these issues to count in opera is great music. That's the most important requirement of all. Opera, it seems to me (if I may approach the subject slightly differently) is about three things: it's about singing, it's about music, and it's about art. When I look at it this way, I see a kind of triple failure on the part of opera at this moment. On the level of singing, I see that the great operas of the past have become increasingly difficult to cast with first-rate singers, and however they're cast, the results are increasingly poor. In this line, I have often said that you only need listen to the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts at the moment, and in particular to the 1989 Bayreuth Festival broadcasts, to know just what a dreadful state singing—at the top—is in today.

Then if we look at what I see as the failure of opera as music, I think we have to realize the true test of an opera, and of its survival, is whether it's capable of moving into the concert hall. The great operas of the past exist not only in the opera house (though they surely exist there); they exist as arias that are performed by singers in concert; they exist as overtures, and they exist in full-length concert performance. They exist, in other words, as viable works even when stripped of the distractions of acting and staging. If we look at the operas written in recent years, and each of us will have a different cut-off date over the past several decades, we will find that new opera nowhere exists in the concert hall. In other words, the life of symphony orchestra concerts and vocal recitals goes on without any participation of recent operatic composition.

We must be careful not to blame opera alone for this shortfall in music; the musical problems of opera are no more than an inevitable corollary of the musical problems of music itself. Nor is the lack of marvelous new operatic music, any more than the lack of marvelous new music in general, a matter of lack of support. Everyone talks about the record of Germany in the support of new music, new opera, and so on. What's left of all this? I want to know what's left of the great exemplar of that movement, Stockhausen. What's left of it? What's left of his music? Who wants to hear it? All his records are there. The records are there because the Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft and its owners have wanted to expunge the memory of the Nazis in the mind of cultivated people the world over. But the fact is that nothing is left. Where Stockhausen is concerned, you don't want to hear the records or the music, and no one else does either.

Not only is there a shortfall in new opera when it is considered from the standpoint of music. There's the much wider problem of

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opera as art. I would say that the very existence of our panel today is pretty convincing evidence that opera as art is in a bad way. Because what we are doing here, of course, is talking about everything except the art of opera, about its music, or about its singing. By the way, that applies to me too. Because I've now been seduced into talking about opera as words, I too have been treating opera as if it were only words.

Everyone now talks about how important it is for politics to be put into opera. Of course we see the proliferation of this idea everywhere. In Europe, we've had the political stagings of Wagner's *Ring*, beginning, I suppose, with Götz Friedrich and continuing with Patrice Chéreau. Lots of less interesting but still trendy directors have gotten in on the act too. We also have new operas: Anthony Davis—sitting next to me—with *X*, and the Sellars-Adams collaboration *Nixon in China*. Those operas are certainly about politics. They certainly take political subjects, treat them from a political point of view, and attempt to appeal to an audience with a particular political commitment.

Then, too, we have the fad of reworking old pieces. In this country, Peter Sellars is well known for his contribution to this practice. Perhaps I might take a moment to talk about Mr. Sellars's Chicago *Tannhäuser*, put on by my friend Ardis Krainik, the General Director of the Chicago Lyric Opera, whom I see here in the audience today. I want to share with you my thought about how all of you would have felt if the Sellars *Tannhäuser* had not been about the conservative evangelist Jimmy Swaggart but had instead been about the liberal Senator Ted Kennedy. Or perhaps if it had been about the equally liberal, but now discredited, former Senator Gary Hart. I had actually a rather good time on the plane coming here, thinking of how the characters could be reworked. Gary Hart, of course, would be Tannhäuser, his wife Lee would be Elisabeth, and Donna Rice would be Venus; in a cameo appearance, rather like the Italian Singer in *Der Rosenkavalier*, John Denver would be Wolfram von Eschenbach. How would you like that? Would you like to see a classic opera thus represented?

Let me be just a shade more serious. In the late 1930s, the Nazis and their German artistic collaborators attempted to rework the oratorio *Judas Maccabaeus* of Handel. They did it by providing new words that would avoid the stain of the Judaic-Old Testament subject; they also commissioned various complaisant composers to provide a new music to replace Mendelssohn's immortal masterpiece in performances of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I take it that none of you would be in favor of this kind of updating of musico-dramatic works to reflect present-day political realities. You, like decent people everywhere, would reject this blatant and indeed murderous anti-Semitism; I suspect you would be the first to ask for what can only be called "authenticity."

But beyond the immediate judgment involved here—which it goes without saying I fully agree with—aren't you then being trapped by the logic of your position into evaluating art on a purely political basis? If you reject—as you should—Hitler's political updating of Handel, but you support Peter Sellars's socio-political updating of *Tannhäuser*, aren't you making a political rather than an artistic judgment? Aren't you really saying that some politics you like, and some politics you don't, and if the reworking of opera goes in the direction of the politics you like, fine; if it doesn't, you don't like it? That means that not opera, not singing, not music, not art, but politics, is your test.

It is now fashionable to say that opera, like all art, must be "challenging." I don't think that's a fair reading of the history of art: it seems to me that the preponderance of great art has in fact reinforced and passed on, rather than challenged and destroyed, the prevailing values of society. But if we say that art should be a challenge, shouldn't we then go on to say that art itself should be challenged?

I see people in this room nodding. Well, forces in the Congress of the United States are now trying to challenge art. You're not

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in favor of that kind of challenge, are you? As a matter of fact, not only are you not in favor of the content of the challenge, you're against the challenge being made at all; that is, you're against it, in principle, as a human activity. It seems to me that there is a kind of playing with fire here, in which the very important, I believe God-given, traditions of our American polity, the best traditions, are being taken for granted as a backstop by the very people who are unwilling to admit that these traditions actually exist. Now, when that happens, you find that the people caught in the middle begin to lose confidence in the traditions themselves. There is a playing with fire going on here, and I'm amazed that people whose life is opera, as is certainly the case for all of you, don't realize quite what the stakes are in this discussion.

Are we really ready to apply partisan politics as the test for what we do in opera in this country in the 1990s? Here we are, sitting in Washington, with all the reality of power that suggests. Now if we're going to apply politics in this way to opera, I think we're redefining opera. We're using opera as a word in quite a new way. Certainly we have never used it in this way in this country before. If we accomplish this redefinition, and make artistic judgments on this basis, I actually would agree that this very subject—opera redefined to mean politics—might be a wonderful subject for an opera. But I have to point out one problem with this fascinating subject. We need a great composer—say Richard Strauss—to make an opera out of it. But then we're right back to square one with the need for great music. For in opera, music still comes, and will always come, first.

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Vistas of inanity: art and ideas in the Eighties

by Roger Kimball

In 1962, in a remarkably prescient essay titled "How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name," the critic Clement Greenberg indicted contemporary art criticism for indulging in "a fatality of misinterpretation that was also a fatality of nonsense." Taking as his point of departure Harold Rosenberg's celebrated but wildly incoherent essay on "action painting" (a phrase that had ripened into one of the chief critical catchphrases of recent decades), Greenberg showed how a great deal of what then passed for art criticism was really just pompous blather that had virtually nothing to do with art. "It was," he wrote, "as though the critics of modern art set out to justify everything that philistines have said about them." Heavy with its load of pretentious terminology cribbed from other disciplines, such writing wasn't simply fake criticism, it was fake everything: "pseudo-description," Greenberg called it, as well as "pseudo-narrative, pseudo-exposition, pseudo-history, pseudo-philosophy, pseudo-psychology, and . . . pseudo-poetry."

For anyone interested in the arts and art criticism, the early Sixties must seem like a cultural Arcadia compared to the Eighties and (so far) the Nineties. Greenberg had pointed out that "the absurd" proliferated in art criticism "with greater vigor perhaps than anywhere else in our culture . . . . Contemporary art criticism is absurd," he explained at the end of his essay,

> not only because of its rhetoric, its language, and its solecisms of logic. It is also absurd because of its repetitiousness . . . . Vistas of inanity open up that would have made Apollinaire or Elie Faure blanch. Things that would get expelled from other kinds of writing by laughter multiply and flourish in art writing.

Today, alas, the disease that Greenberg identified in writing about art has become epidemic, as even a peek into the pages of contemporary academic criticism of art or literature amply shows. No rhetoric is too extreme, no language too barbarous for our critics. And as for logical fastidiousness, the effort to make one's prose clear, consecutive, coherent—well, all that was long ago consigned to the ash heap of "objectivistic" or "patriarchal" thinking. The vistas of inanity that Greenberg conjured up now dominate the cultural horizon.

But criticism is not the only thing to have been debased since the early Sixties. Art itself as well as the institutions—the museums and galleries—that exhibit and promote modern art have undergone an analogous devolution. They, too, have suffered from rhetorical excesses, logical solecisms, and "vistas of inanity." Part of Greenberg's point in "How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name"—it was the silver lining in the otherwise gloomy analysis he provided—was that the signal achievements of modern art had outrun the categories of traditional criticism. While art

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criticism wallowed in its mire of verbiage, there were artists—Smith, Pollock, de Kooning, and Motherwell among them—who had produced excellent new work whose *aesthetic* significance escaped the ditherings of much contemporary art criticism. Today, however, most of the art that forces itself on the public's attention is infected with the very absurdities Greenberg discerned in the fashionable art writing of thirty years ago.

This is not simply to say that there is a lot of bad art around. It is always the case that vastly more bad art than good is produced. What is different today is the *way* in which much highly touted art is bad. Until recently, art that failed generally did so in an easily recognizable way; that is, it failed in an effort to be good art, where "good art" signified a complex but nonetheless specifiable category of accomplishment. Perhaps the failed art was technically incompetent; perhaps it was hackneyed or trite; perhaps it was showy and meretricious. In art, as in life, there are innumerable ways to fail. Yet even in the midst of its failure, bad art declared the cogency and value of good art; for the qualities we attribute to good art were precisely what the bad art had attempted but conspicuously failed to achieve.

This is no longer the case. The pseudo-criticism that Greenberg excoriated has helped to spawn a new species of bad art. This is art that fails not because it falls short in its effort to be good art but because the artists who make it have abandoned the quest for aesthetic distinction altogether. "Art" in any traditional sense no longer matters to them. What matters in the art world today are "ideas"—ideas and the demotic parody of ideas that fill the pages of our critical journals and, increasingly, the walls and the nooks and crannies of our galleries and museums devoted to contemporary art.

For some time now we have seen objects and behavior that can be called art only by dint of extreme lexical generosity blithely accorded the status and perquisites of art. No doubt Marcel Duchamp—who cynically proffered such quotidian objects as a urinal, a bottle rack, and a snow shovel as works of art and was stunned to see them taken up and praised by the critical establishment as, well, as *art*—is one of the main progenitors of this state of affairs. But wherever we place the responsibility—not to say the blame—for the confusions rampant in the art world today, there can be little doubt that many artists and critics are in the grip of a new didacticism that subordinates aesthetics to ideas and, indeed, to ideology.

What is the cultural significance of this subordination? What do we lose when artists and critics relegate the aesthetic dimension of art to a minor role or completely exclude it? What sort of ideas step in to take the place of aesthetic considerations? What lessons, finally, are artists and critics attempting to teach us? As we enter upon the Nineties, we are offered an exhibition that seems custom-made to provoke such questions. In both its selection of artworks and the intellectual frame it assumes, "Culture and Commentary: An Eighties Perspective," on view this spring at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C.,[1] is a veritable inventory of the trendy attitudes that form an up-to-date incarnation of the kind of excesses that Greenberg had in mind.

Organized by Kathy Halbreich, a curator of contemporary art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, "Culture and Commentary" contains approximately sixty works by fifteen artists who came to prominence in the Eighties. Among the artists represented are such well-known figures as Jenny Holzer, Julian Schnabel, Francesco Clemente, Cindy Sherman, Jeff Koons, and Laurie Anderson. In addition to paintings and sculptures, the exhibition features photographs, videos, and

1 "Culture and Commentary: An Eighties Perspective" is on view at the Hirshhorn from February 8 through May 6. It is accompanied by a catalogue of the same title with essays by Kathy Halbreich and others; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 196 pages, $22.95.

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what have come to be called "environmental installations"—all in all, a diversity of media that echoes the diversity of the contemporary art world and, Miss Halbreich conjectures, "signals the final abandonment of traditional hierarchy of media."

Most of the contents of "Culture and Commentary" will be familiar to anyone who kept an eye on developments in the art world in the Eighties. Julian Schnabel weighs in with a few of his famous paintings encrusted with broken plates and a couple of paintings on black velvet. It should perhaps be mentioned that Mr. Schnabel also has the distinction of having created the only work in this exhibition that can claim even a minimum of aesthetic interest: a sketchy but straightforward full-length portrait of his wife painted in 1980.

Laurie Anderson is represented by *O Superman*, a nine-minute videotape that plays continuously from a color television set placed near the entrance to the exhibition. Like most video art, *O Superman* is basically an agglomeration of politically tinged clichés. Miss Halbreich's commentary effectively summarizes the tenor and mood of the piece: "With equal measures of despair and irony, Anderson locates comfort inside the might of the military and market, a tune often sung by speech writers for paternalistic politicians who also confuse might with right."

Other items in the exhibition include a water-filled glass tank in which two basketballs float (Jeff Koons), some stone benches and large framed posters covered with aphorisms like ABUSE OF POWER COMES AS NO SURPRISE (Jenny Holzer), and an installation of some extremely uncomfortable-looking furniture called "Sacco and Vanzetti Reading Room #4" (Siah Armajani). Sherrie Levine and Robert Gober collaborated to bring us an installation consisting of a large, nearly empty room hung with wallpaper dotted with the image of a white man lying in bed dreaming of a black man who has been hanged. Around the room are scattered such edifying objects as a few realistic-looking bags of cat litter (Mr. Gober) and blow-ups of panels from the comic strip *Krazy Kat* (Miss Levine). A wall label informs viewers that the installation is a comment on "a tragic history of oppression and disenfranchisement. This collaboration by Gober and Levine is aimed directly at the complacency of the dominant culture in the face of historic wrongs that have yet to be set right."

Artistically, "Culture and Commentary" is an exhibition of the utmost banality and aesthetic poverty. But this is hardly surprising. Despite a fervent declaration in the catalogue's acknowledgments that "art matters," it is clear that art is the last thing on the agenda of "Culture and Commentary." This is obvious not only from the feeble aesthetic quality of the works on view but also from the way the artists were selected. There is no guiding taste or aesthetic intelligence in evidence in this exhibition. On the contrary, what we are given is merely a random selection of names that dominated the art-world hit parade in the Eighties.

What is very much in evidence, however, is a guiding political program that poaches on the prestige of art to further its aims. At the center of this program are all the radical slogans and sentiments that are abroad in the art world today. Everything from feminism and a distrust of capitalism to environmentalism and a grab bag of ill-digested ideas from various French philosophers are swept together in a dizzying mélange. Adherence to this program sometimes requires great critical ingenuity. Consider, for example, Miss Halbreich's commentary on the bric-a-brac that the German artist Katharina Fritsch has managed to pawn off as art. "The sadness at the heart of Fritsch's work," she writes,

> suggests that the systems on which Western culture is based—religious, financial, representational—no longer provide certainty of faith, which while potentially repressive, is reassuring. Faced with Fritsch's many madonnas, money boxes, and black cats we invent and inventory again the sense of loss, false desire, and superstition that spring from our need to

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> consecrate and consume. We also confront the perils of our collective acts—murder, imperialism, and the separation for black from white.

And this is about kitschy little plastic flowers, figurines of cats, and plaster Madonnas!

The first image to confront readers of the catalogue for "Culture and Commentary" is a photograph of the space shuttle *Challenger* exploding in midair; the last image is a photograph of a hundred-yen bank note. Perhaps the juxtaposition is intended to symbolize the twin dangers of Western technology and Eastern plutocracy: Miss Halbreich never says. But it is clear that she has invested the exhibition with great intellectual ambition. In her catalogue essay, she tells us that "Culture and Commentary" attempts "to locate a particular set of intellectual concerns that have informed the cultural dramas of the past ten years and influenced the artists whose work best comments on those societal changes." There is no consecutive argument that sets forth these "intellectual" concerns; but there is a unifying tone and animus that informs Miss Halbreich's writing. In an admiring review of the exhibition, a critic for the *The New York Times* wrote that the catalogue is "filled with ideas." "Filled" is definitely the *mot juste*. Here are a few specimen passages:

> [America], sold a false and bellicose image of strength over sensitivity, found comfort in nostalgia, retreating to a kinder, gentler memory of times past.
>
> As the rich got richer, the Earth poorer, and those sick with AIDS closer to dying, faith in the future, which failed to trickle down from a president made in Hollywood, wavered.
>
> Coinciding with this diminution of a unitary and Western-dominated view of the world was a growing mistrust of the utopian and self-reflexive rigidity of Modernism.
>
> Artists began a self-conscious appropriating of Modernism's formalist mannerisms in order to critique a style that increasingly was equated with the separation of art from culture and associated with a prescriptive, repressively mainstream vision. By questioning the primacy of authorship, uniqueness, and formalism, some artists, both female and male, pictured themselves outside a system that valorized the supposedly heroic antics of white men. Investigations of the other became pronounced.

In other words, "Culture and Commentary" is little more than a smorgasbord of radical and Left-liberal clichés serving the ubiquitous triumvirate of gender, race, and class. Ronald Reagan, Jesse Helms, Western society, men—especially white men—are duly criticized; anything that diverges from the "repressively mainstream" (is there a mainstream that is not "repressive"?) is hailed.

Miss Halbreich also serves up a large portion of the pseudo-philosophical erotica that festoons so much contemporary criticism. For example, she describes the painter Francesco Clemente as "a modern day fabulist—the oracle of orifices—whose sensuous and disquieting tales picture the search for cultural distinctions represented in myth and fixed in the memory of a time before colonialism and television . . . . His imagery," Miss Halbreich continues,

> often exhibits an existential fretfulness reminiscent of the introspective pull that sometimes follows coitus . . . . He is a voyeur of his own homelessness, and his sexuality gives him his portable dwelling, the shelter of identity. In Hindu fashion, he often portrays evanescent or out-of-body experiences reached (paradoxically, in Western terms) through a widening of orifices and erotic possibility. This opening of the senses to the world creates a visage alternately vulnerable, terrified, resigned, and preterhuman. Like speech, inner organs connect to external circumstances. Entrails and bodily excretions, like Persian script, curl from the anus or vagina. Often the animal and the human share a moment of connectedness, an image suggesting that the

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> instinctual erotic pleasure of our progenitors may be repressed rather than remote.

Vistas, great stretching vistas, infinite vistas of inanity: Mr. Greenberg hardly knew the half of it.

In addition to Miss Halbreich's vapid reflections, this catalogue "filled with ideas" concludes with five brief essays by people whom it pleased Miss Halbreich to call leading humanists. Two of these leading humanists, Vijak Mahdavi and Bernardo Nadal-Ginard, are professors at the Harvard Medical School. They collaborated on an essay called "The Human Spirit in the Era of Genetic Engineering," which is essentially a sermon on the marvels of genetic engineering. "What we care most about is not quantity but quality of life," the authors inform us. "What we want is the power to reduce the amount of physical and mental suffering. The DNA revolution is a means to that end."

Then there is an essay by that leading humanist, the popular novelist Michael M. Thomas, about the moral dangers of money in our greedy, credit-driven, capitalistic society. One is grateful, at least, that Mr. Thomas confined himself here to something he knows about. Another leading humanist, Sherry Turkle, contributed an essay about computers, artificial intelligence, and post-modernism, while Maurice Culot, a French architectural historian, provided an elusive essay about urban renewal and modernism. It is not clear whether we owe the observation that "until his death in 1927, Eugene Atget had never photographed a modern building" to the translators' incompetence or M. Culot's own sense of paradox.

No contemporary art catalogue is complete without some self-righteous hand-wringing about AIDS. Miss Halbreich does her bit along the way, but she has also engaged Simon Watney, who—in addition of course to being a leading humanist—is an art historian and "AIDS activist" and the author of *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media*. Among much else, Mr. Watney's essay on "Representation and Sexual Identity" tells us that "AIDS continues to be used to shore up the fragile categories of sexuality throughout the West" and that "the AIDS crisis has forced a new awareness of the need for a full-fledged assault on the systematic double standards and cruelty of the categories of Western sexuality and the extreme limitations of formalist aesthetics in a period of intense social transition."

What are we to make of this heap of politicized intellectual debris? It would be comforting if we could say that "Culture and Commentary" were some bizarre aberration in the annals of contemporary art and criticism. Unfortunately, it is simply the going thing in the chic purlieus of the art world. Our museums and galleries and even our classrooms are full of this sort of thing. Indeed, what makes the exhibition significant is not its novelty but the opposite: the fact that it so perfectly mirrors the politicized program fueling so much of our cultural life today. One cannot even claim that the artists Miss Halbreich has chosen to exhibit have been (as they say) "co-opted" by her rhetoric. Like the critics who champion them, the artists, too, have given up on art for the sake of radical political pronouncements and fragmentary, often pathetic attempts at radical cerebration—as well as, it must be said, assiduous sallies on that precinct of capitalistic ambition known as the contemporary art market.

Of course, the real tragedy in all this is that the genuine art of our time is left utterly out of account. Wedded to these ever-widening vistas of inanity, fashionable artists and critics are drifting farther and farther from any contact with the realm of aesthetic experience, which—despite the noisy cultural vicissitudes and depredations of the Eighties—remains the true source of art and the gravamen of criticism. What these artists and writers—and increasingly, alas, the public as well—are left with are series of objects that range from the trivial to the repulsive, accompanied by endless commentaries that present a variety of tried and true

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political slogans in as pretentious a manner as possible.

Miss Halbreich's essay is preceded by no fewer than six epigraphs, taken from sources as diverse as Andy Warhol and Clement Greenberg. Part of the snippet quoted from an exchange between Marcel Duchamp and Pierre Cabanne seemed particularly relevant to the spirit of her exhibition.

> *Cabanne:* "But what do you believe in?"
>
> *Duchamp:* "Nothing, of course! The word 'belief' is another error. It's like the word 'judgment,' they're both horrible ideas, on which the world is based."

Neither belief nor judgment are among the resources available to the "Eighties perspective" that informs this exhibition, since both are presumably discredited relics of a white, Western, patriarchal system of repressive social relations. In fact, perhaps the saddest thing about "Culture and Commentary: An Eighties Perspective" is its subtitle: who could doubt it?

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"An academic story"
by Louis Simpson

One day during his office hour
a young woman appeared. "I'm Merridy,"
she said, "Merridy Johnson.
I'd like you to read my poems."

He said that he didn't teach writing.
"But couldn't you just look
and tell me, are they any good?"

She was carrying a flat white box.
She removed some tissue paper,
lifted out an album with a red cover,
and handed it to him carefully.

The poems were written in green ink
with flowers and birds in the margins.

She said, "What do you think?"
He said there were some nice images.
"Where?" she said, and leaned to see.

*

His wife didn't go to poetry readings.
He went by himself, and sat at the rear.

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But this evening he stayed to the end
and went to the reception afterwards
at Professor "Pat" Melrose's house.
When he arrived the poet was reciting
again, to a circle on the floor.
Merridy patted a place beside her
and he sat.

Her eyes were shining.
Poetry gave her goosebumps.
Taking his hand she showed him where.

Melrose was a poet himself.
And there was nothing professorial
about these evenings. They were . . . bohemian.

Melrose's wife, a little woman
with a face like a rhesus monkey's
went around the room winking and grimacing.
"The pot's in the kitchen, acid's in the study"
she said with an eldritch laugh.

*

He was stoned, and so was she,
going down Spruce Street
with a moon in the redwoods
and San Francisco glittering
on the bay, through the fog.

The poetry was great, she thought.
"As great as Bob Dylan's?"

But irony was wasted on her,
she was innocent. Like her room
with its posters of Joan Baez
and, right on, Bob Dylan.

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Her books . . . *Siddhartha,* Ferlinghetti,
Alan Watts and Suzuki on Zen.
They spoke for her generation
like the *Poems, Sacred and Moral*
of a mid-Victorian girl.

And as softly as saying her prayers
she murmured, "Let's go to bed."

*

Sam Mendelson was a font of wisdom.
He knew there was going to be an opening
for a medievalist at Ohio,
and who was sleeping with whom.
He said, "But they don't do it here.
They go to San Francisco."

The MLA was meeting in San Francisco.
There were sessions he had to go to,
Henry told his wife, Cynthia,
all very boring but unavoidable.
He'd be back in three days.

He and Merridy walked all over.
They ate at Fisherman's Wharf
and rode on a trolley.
They explored Chinatown,
and went dancing at Whisky à Go-Go.
He took her to The Hungry I,
and they saw *Doctor Zhivago.*

*

"Cynthia," he said, "I'm home!"
No answer. He went upstairs,
unpacked his suitcase, came down,
and was settling in with a scotch
in front of *The Untouchables*
when he had what he could only describe
as a sinking feeling.

He took the stairs two at a time.
No, her dresses were in the closet,
her doodads still on the table.

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She came through the door
minutes later. She'd been shopping.
"How was the MLA?"

He gave a circumstantial account
of the sessions he'd attended
in Yeats and Pound and Eliot.

"I had a vision," she said.
"I saw you in a room with a woman
as clearly as you're sitting here."

And he had always thought of her
as a person of limited imagination!

*

He was up for promotion, to associate
with tenure.

"Melrose is out to get you,"
Sam said. "Can you think of a reason?"

Henry thought. He shook his head.

"Did you insult Mrs. Melrose?"

"I don't recall. I may have."

At the meeting to decide his fate—
they're supposed to be confidential
but someone always tells—
Melrose spoke.

His only concern
was in the area of collegiality.
"Associate" . . . think what that means.
Someone you have to your house,
introduce to your wife . . .

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If the fathers and mothers of the children
to whom we stand *in loco parentis*
were here, they would ask, they would demand to know,
not is he supposed to be clever
and did *The New York Times* or some other
publication
give a book a good review,
but is he a moral man?

Henry wasn't promoted, and he didn't get
tenure.

*

That was why he was at the MLA.
He was being interviewed at five
by a man from upstate New York.
They had a place for a lost soul
somewhere in the Finger Lakes,
teaching rhetoric.

"I've never taught it,
but I don't suppose it matters.
I've been talking it all my life."
He laughed nervously. "Shall we have another?"

But I had to go. We were interviewing
on the fourteenth floor.

"You're just in time,"
said the Chair. "Mrs. Harris
is going to tell us about her dissertation
on women's writing."

"Ms. Harris,"
she said. "The title is *Theory
and Praxis in Feminist Criticism.*"
In a little while it became obvious
we weren't interviewing her, she was
interviewing us.

We used to teach poetry, now it's theory.
There's no longer room in the system
for a mind as romantic as Henry's.

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Art

Mixed media

by Jed Perl

There's no mystery as to why so many contemporary artists want to work with imagery that's derived from the movies. Movie culture is just about the only artistic culture that is any longer capable of bringing together a broad range of the public. Talking about Daniel Day-Lewis's performance as a paraplegic in *My Left Foot*, or our reactions to the black comedy of Paul Mazursky's *Enemies, a Love Story*, offers us an easy, lively form of social interaction. As we find out what other people look for in a movie—they may be people we know at work, or relatives, or the parents of our children's friends—we learn about one another's sensibilities and tastes. A movie is an event in the culture at large; this is far less frequently the case with a ballet performance or an art show or even a best-selling novel. The visual artists who reach out to movie culture by borrowing images or iconography or compositional strategies from Hollywood are trying to open up art-gallery art to the larger culture—an honorable objective. But the effect more often than not is to close down art-gallery art: the one-on-one experience of looking at a painting or a sculpture is diluted. The references to movie culture carry with them a freight of allusions that is difficult for the artist to control. You can't see the pictures for the popcorn.

No contemporary artist is quite so saturated in movie culture as Cindy Sherman. She is a hit with the part of the public that wants to believe that gallery-going equals movie-going. These days that's a considerable public. Sherman's show at Metro Pictures last January was one of those rare occasions when a SoHo gallery is actually crowded on a weekday afternoon. The work consisted of a series of photographic self-portraits based on Old Master paintings. But what these color photographs recalled wasn't Old Master paintings so much as the historical costume dramas that Hollywood used to produce in great quantities, with settings based on Old Master paintings. Sherman is an artist who can't see the paintings for the movies that have mimicked the paintings.

In these color photographs Sherman dresses herself up to look like everything from a fifteenth-century Flemish Madonna to the hostess of a nineteenth-century Parisian salon. We always know it's Cindy Sherman, just the way we know it's Charlton Heston in *The Agony and the Ecstasy* or Charles Laughton in *Rembrandt* or Laurence Olivier in *Henry V*. When filmed costume dramas work for us it's because the mismatch between a *mise en scène* derived from old paintings and a contemporary acting style is fused by the forward movement of the drama: actors bring it all to life. The effect of Sherman's photographs is very different. Her poker-faced expressions, which are often accented by funny noses or wigs, deaden whatever drama is implicit in the set-ups: she brings out the tackiness of ye olde props and costumes. Sometimes, she flaunts

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the fakery: a fake bosom is photographed with the strings that attach it to the shoulders showing, or the edge of a bald pate is clear as day. Sherman belabors the ludicrousness of costume drama; and the audience takes this for a revelation. She doesn't offer the exhilaration of a historical drama that pushes costumes and action into an unpredictable unity; she deconstructs Hollywood. She takes us through a good swath of the history of European art, peeping out from her sackcloth and crinolines with that dopey look of hers, as if to say, "Here we are in another great moment of Western art, and, guess what, it's just Hollywood pasteboard and greasepaint, too." This is the latest thing in postmodern criticality. You study up with the movies on late-night TV and then put together your I-hate-the-history-of-Western-art show.

Few contemporary artists have as loyal a following as Cindy Sherman: people go to her shows to see their current preoccupations hanging on the wall. Sherman's early work, in which she often played a sort of surrealist version of Doris Day, jibed with the beginnings of the downtown nostalgia for Fifties style—the style of the baby boomer's childhood. Sherman's horror-movie phase, in which she groped around in the dirt, was coordinated with the "Primitivism" show at the Museum of Modern Art. Her last show, which included images that focused on puddles of vomit, was a dare addressed to her paying public ("See if you'll buy this!") and represented a very *au courant* confession of discomfort with one's own art-world stardom. The new show fits neatly into the taste for lavish period effects that's been a dominant trend in home décor and fashion for the past decade. A year ago, Stephen Frears's movie *Dangerous Liaisons* brought historical drama back to life in Hollywood; and I would not be surprised if *Dangerous Liaisons* was one of the inspirations for Sherman's new show. The disjuncture of the accoutrements and the affect in Sherman's new photographs could be inspired by the odd effect that Frears achieved by putting such American actors as Glenn Close and John Malkovich in period dress and settings. The Frears movie was held together by its pacing and the wickedly obsessive rapport of its stars: their behavior bridged the gap between Laclos's epistolary novel and the twentieth century. In *Dangerous Liaisons* the period costumes built up an atmosphere that the actors carried with them. Sherman, in her unreadable, inexpressive face, is mired in her settings.

As I went through her Metro Pictures show, I found myself thinking more and more about all the trouble (and expense) that had gone into Sherman's costumes and period backdrops. The mechanics of the work creak very loudly. And, of course, Sherman wants that creak. It's her way of suggesting the unreality of it all. Looking at these photographs, one passes in rapid succession from the spit and polish of the uptown antique store to the moldiness of the touring company's prop room to the drag act in the downtown club—and then back to the uptown antique store. Everything refers to the movies and the Old Masters. It's all served up in the form of overheated color photographs. Especially when they're very large, they have fuzzy, indistinct surfaces that some may take for "painterly." No wonder people describe this trendy hodgepodge as a great synthesis: it's got "everything." Sherman works the art-gallery audience as shamelessly as Steven Spielberg works the audience at the Sixplex in the mall.

There have always been artists who want to use the conventions of traditional easel painting as the starting point for a modern portrait style. When contemporaries such as Leland Bell, Paul Georges, Louisa Matthiasdottir, and Temma Bell use the immobile poses of the Old Masters as a foil for modern psychological insights, they're labeled traditionalists and reactionaries. Yet there's more risk in any one of the portraits that Paul Georges does in a Velázquez style than in all of Sherman's photographs put together. While painters who are involved in a living dialogue with the past are dismissed outright or patronized as unpleasant anomalies, Cindy Sherman's rip-off act is hailed as an

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James Aponovich

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Still Life with Hydrangea, 48" x 60", 1989-90, Oil on Canvas

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original reinterpretation of the Old Masters. It's situations like this that make art lovers want to go home and pull the covers over their heads.

I have walked through the contemporary section of the Museum of Modern Art at the Pompidou Center in Paris and thought that a painting by Shirley Jaffe, an American abstractionist who's lived for many years in France, is the only creditable thing on display. I've walked in and out of the commercial galleries in the streets around the Pompidou Center and thought that a Jaffe painting in the Galerie Fournier made everything else look like pretty sorry stuff. Jaffe's paintings, which consist of hard-edged shapes, by turns whimsically biomorphic or dryly geometric, arranged without overlaps, usually on a white ground, have purity and authority. It was a good thing when Artists Space gave her a show last year. The Holly Solomon Gallery followed it up, this past January, with an uptown exhibition. So far as my friends can recall, these were Jaffe's first appearances in New York. It's about time.

There's a great deal of color in Jaffe's paintings. Her shapes, each in a single color, comprise a rainbow of sherbert hues: lemons and tangerines and lime greens. Yet the effect isn't exactly zestful. The color, partly because it's set in a neutral ground, is a bit muffled. And the shapes themselves give the effect of an ebullience that's been reigned in. These shapes—which range from plant-like to machine-like—aren't expansive, and don't seem to interact very much with one another. A Shirley Jaffe painting is an arrangement of forms. But the arrangements aren't necessarily compositions: they're considered and yet somehow arbitrary. The arbitrariness introduces an element of mystery or surprise that Jaffe may want. She may not want us to know exactly why this form is close to that form. Perhaps the peculiar mélange of Jaffe's forms is a conscious risk; it can also leave a viewer bemused.

Jaffe's work is in the purist line of modern art: looking at her paintings, one thinks of

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Arp and the Matisse cutouts, of Taeuber-Arp, Herbin, Mondrian. Some of the unemphatic force of Jaffe's work comes from her allegiance to that glorious tradition. She's attuned to the pictorial power that's inherent in an unmodulated plane of color or a razor-sharp contour. She loves the empyrean universe that the European abstractionists dreamed up. I do, too. And yet Jaffe's work doesn't quite have the quality of ultimate distillation that I expect from purist art. Her forms are a little too random to feel inevitable. Her compositions don't quite embody some overarching logic. The best paintings in the Solomon show—they included *Betwixt and Between*, *Square in Square*, *Moroccan Dream*, *Four Horizons*, *Bagatelle*—are the sum of their parts. And a viewer can leave feeling a bit cheated, cheated of the moment when the forms in a painting stop adding up and start multiplying—when a painting goes over the top.

The elements in Jaffe's compositions are quirky; they jangle against one another in odd ways. Emotionally, Jaffe is an impure purist. There's a cartoonish edge to some of the shapes; they're pared down, but oddball anthropomorphic readings keep cropping up. Perhaps this is all intentional. Nevertheless, I can't help feeling that Jaffe is reaching for elaborate comic effects that she doesn't quite bring off. (When Arp and Brancusi do something funny, they do it with elegance but also with innocence: their jokes have the saving simplicity of a Josephine Baker dance.) Despite the refinement of some of Shirley Jaffe's forms, I don't turn away from a Jaffe painting feeling as if I've drunk champagne. But I want to feel that way. What she leaves me with is the sense that I've been in the presence of an accomplished, knowledgeable artist. That's a hell of a lot. The paintings hold the wall (how many contemporary painters can do that?) and I don't forget them after I've seen them.

Joan Snyder's show at Hirschl & Adler Modern last February contained thirty-seven paintings. These new works range in size from seven inches to sixty inches and recapitulate the full panoply of 1980s Neo-Expressionist effects. There are paintings done on colored velvet, and paintings collaged with, in addition to velvet, twigs and nails and bits of rusty metal. There are emblematic figures submerged in waves of paint and grit; there are howling faces, one of which sports a droopy red velvet tongue. Snyder's colors veer abruptly from hot-hot to ice-cold; her paint is often handled without a brush—squeezed out of the tube and smeared around the canvas or scratched into to make deep engraved lines. At least half of the work in this show was rip-snortingly awful. The little canvases that have been draped in velvet to create uneven shapes, like sloppily wrapped packages, are boutique stuff; and most of the figures or figure fragments look like tired reruns of ideas that were already tired when people like Asger Jorn were doing them in the Fifties. There's no excuse for this kind of work; but at least Snyder refuses to take an ironic attitude toward her material—she doesn't produce prepackaged histrionics, like Julian Schnabel or Elizabeth Murray. Snyder carries her heart right there on her sleeve (her shows have this incredible energy level); and when she does something lovely, like the collage called *My Endangered Field* in this show, the pungent surprising color and weird mix of elements come straight out of the artist's no-holds-barred emotional extravagance.

In a statement in the catalogue of the show, Snyder explains that, "emerging from a debilitating case of Lyme Disease last year, I found myself, after not thinking about painting for many months, bursting with ideas. I had a need to work with velvet and rust, with cloth and metal, with wood and nails, with sticks and wire and with paint. Images which I hadn't been in touch with for many months began flooding in. I decided not to edit myself. I painted every idea I had." This show, with its many small, irregularly shaped canvases, had the effect of a scrapbook. Hung close together, the paintings were a mix of nature images (moons and fields and ocean waves) and nightmares (those horrifying faces, those scorched

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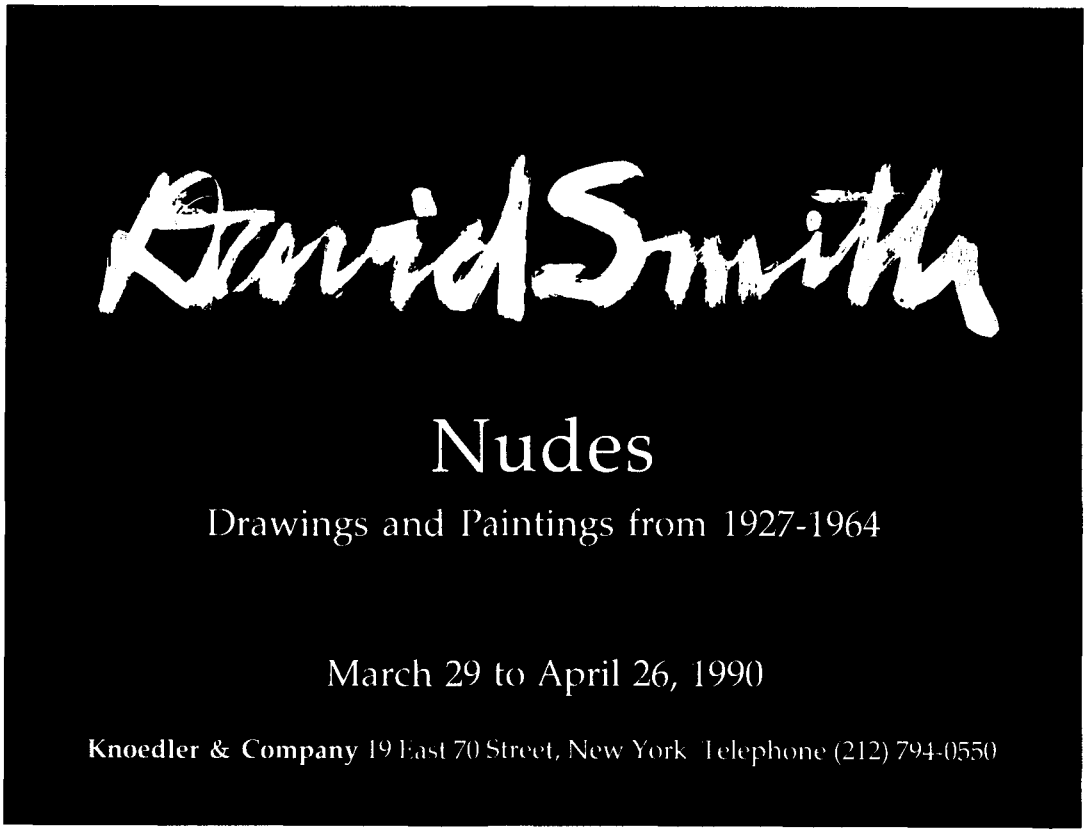
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plains). In the best work, the natural world becomes a sort of mirror of psychic states. This is Caspar David Friedrich redone after Hans Hofmann.

It has always been clear that Snyder is a modern romantic; but never before has her connection to an early twentieth-century romantic tradition that found its geographical center in Germany come so much to the fore. *Red Cymbals/Sounds* uses color as an analogy to the emotional impact of music in a way that is meant to invoke Kandinsky, who published a book called *Sounds*. *Black Wellspring Mask*, with the face emerging out of a grid of dark lines, is a self-conscious (overly self-conscious) homage to the faces of Paul Klee. A taste for Klee and Kandinsky is very clear in Snyder's work; but Snyder's emotional heat refers mostly to the earlier work of these artists, when they were involved in the *Blaue Reiter Almanac*. Snyder's work has none of the classic lucidity and graphic clarity that become more and more a driving force with Klee and Kandinsky in the Twenties. Snyder's works, with their collaged bits of metal and wood, have a Dadaist air, which is probably why, among the Expressionists, she recalls most of all Kurt Schwitters—who'd been influenced by Kandinsky and Franz Marc before World War I. Snyder leaves a viewer with a tumbled mix of emotions that's reminiscent of Schwitters. In *Moons/Velvet/Mud*, eleven bits of velvet are each painted with a phase of the moon. Over this collage are arranged some twigs and bits of wire. This is a scrappy farmscape pastoral. In the horizontal work *My Endangered Field*, the center is filled with a flower-dotted field painted in a multitude of greens, with touches of alizarin and purple. Around this verdant glade are blots and swirls of brown and yellow and orange paint, together with gnarled branches, wires, and a weathered hunk of wood with an angular, cubistic shape. *My Endangered Field* is a chaotic rush of images; and yet it builds, with the rhythm of the twigs echoing the rhythm of the paint. Here Snyder sums up a certain kind of Long Island pastoral, encroached upon by

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suburbia, as accurately as Schwitters sums up the inflation-riddled cities of pre-World War II Germany. Snyder's rusty wires are, like Schwitters's ticket stubs, poetic refuse.

In her statement, Snyder says that "I needed to paint requiems for our losses, to meditate and chant and to once again paint the fields surrounding my home which were now being threatened by developers." By now confessional art is such an established genre that many of us have a sort of immediate mistrust of anything that's unabashedly autobiographical. We're fed up with canned confessions, with artists whose lives seem to come out of central casting. Snyder's story is not more unusual than anybody else's; but she tells it as a painter, she invents forms that jibe with her feelings. She's a messy artist; she has her bombs (and when Expressionists bomb, they bomb bad). But there's something very real here, too. As with Schwitters, the unstable mix of elements somehow holds. *My Endangered Field* goes on the list of Snyder successes, along with some of the *Field* paintings of the mid-1980s and the big *Morning Requiem (For the Children)* from her last Hirschl & Adler show. Combining her old themes in new ways, Snyder draws us into an unfolding story.

John Cheim, the director of the Robert Miller Gallery, was making a point when, last December, he paired a large show of works by the painter Robert Greene with a smaller show of Andy Warhol's photobooth portraits. Greene's softly romantic oils are full of willowy figures who wander amidst the lawns and alleys of some F. Scott Fitzgerald Long Island of the mind. The harsh and casually comic five-and-dime photos that Warhol sent his friends out to do as the basis of his silkscreen portraits show people who are all wired up by New York City life. But Greene and Warhol are really giving two sides of the same glamorously bohemian world. This is a world to which a lot of people would like entrée; many more are anxious to view it from the sidelines. Greene satisfies a voyeuristic curiosity.

Technically, Robert Greene isn't much of a painter. He doesn't know how to weight his colors in order to move objects back into space; he juxtaposes impastoed areas and thinly painted areas in ways that are awkward and pointlessly stylish; and he can't really work his figures and his settings together into a convincing whole. The work is fundamentally amateurish. But by now Greene has been at it for a decade, and his mix of references is well under control. Greene's inspirations include Fragonard, Guardi, Florine Stettheimer, the Neo-Romantics, the murals you see in Italian restaurants, and what Pauline Kael once called the "come-dressed-as-the-sick-soul-of-Europe party movies" of Fellini and Antonioni. Greene manages to cobble his kitschy sense of the past together into some deftly lyrical effects.

Like Warhol's photobooth portraits, Greene's paintings will no doubt mean more to those who know the dramatis personae at first hand; but even an outsider can get the general lay of the land. Greene's immense landscape spaces are elegant stage sets. His figures—a wedding couple, youths in bathing suits or the buff, pedigreed dogs, figures in commedia dell'arte costumes, bare-chested gardeners—mingle together in a democracy of the beautiful people. Beaches full of cabanas recall Visconti's *Death in Venice*; a party on a lawn dominated by a tremendous American flag looks Fellinesque. Nothing ever happens; but that's part of the pleasant suspension of this world. The artist himself, with his dark romantic looks, appears frequently: he's a passive impresario, the most beautiful of all the beautiful ones. Something about the odd scale of Greene's landscapes holds in the mind. Greene's paintings, like the turn-of-the-century paintings of Boldoni and the Twenties paintings of Leonid and Eugene Berman, have a weak but unusual perfume.

I caught up with "Image World," the Whitney Museum's survey of art's thirty-year-old love affair with video culture, on closing Sunday. The galleries were pretty crowded. The crowd was a mix of uptown,

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downtown, and out-of-town. People congregated around the video monitors: around Nam June Paik's wall-sized jamboree, which welcomed you as you walked off the fourth-floor elevators; and around a monitor showing some tongue-in-cheek documentaries about Jeff Koons and other downtown art stars. So far as I could see, the "still" pictures on the walls held people to a lesser degree: they ranged from Pop Art by Robert Rauschenberg and Roy Lichtenstein to 1980s work by David Salle and Cindy Sherman. Perhaps after being razzed up by all that video action, museum-goers found still pictures a come-down. The crowd at "Image World" was a kind of crowd we've seen for decades. I remember a very similar mood back in 1968, at the Museum of Modern Art's "The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age," where Jean Tinguely's audience-friendly *Rotozaza No. 1* tossed big beach balls into the crowd. (That show, organized by Pontus Hulten, had a catalogue with a stamped-metal cover that must by now be a Pop Art classic in its own right.) But whether the year is 1968 or 1990, the audience doesn't seem exactly happy at these technologically minded shows: people walk through, curious, amused, and a little bored. They can't get a handle on it all—and who can blame them? They're in the clutches of what the cultural reporter David D'Arcy calls the trendocracy.

"Image World" was supposed to be a show of democratic art—of art that celebrates the world around us. Yet the range of photo- and video-derived imagery on display had a glazed-over, self-referential aura that left little room for any easy play of the imagination. The imagery was cut off from human desires. (And who gives a hoot if we're told that that's the point?) The problem is that this technology has a life of its own—a life that's not particularly interesting to contemplate as an aesthetic object. I also wonder whether the museum is the place where this stuff can look its best. Earlier this season, at the Farideh Cadot Gallery in SoHo, I saw a show by Jakob Mattner that used technology—admittedly primitive technology—in a poetic way. In a darkened room, Mattner placed several mirrors, each mounted on a metal stand. By shooting light at these mirrors he created a series of ghostly, moony white images on the walls. It was a magical installation, especially when seen in the middle of a sunny day. Nothing at "Image World" had that kind of poetry; but then again I don't really think that I'd have wanted to see Mattner's installation in an art museum. The fun of the Mattner was in its being presented as a *pièce d'occasion*, in one's sneaking up on it. Nam June Paik's video wall might look good in a club; it's not anything you would want to go to a museum for. There can be no question that shows like "Image World" sidetrack a museum from its primary function as a place for contemplation and connoisseurship. But the question one wants to ask the video people is why they feel the need to infuse their particular brand of excitement into the museum context. Shows like "Image World" are meant to whip up a museum; but whatever is vital in pop culture gets stifled. The effect isn't wild-and-crazy, it's debilitating and dull. "Image World" was trumped-up excitement. The glitz gave off no light.

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Music

Why Levine?

by Dana Mack

In light of its offerings these past few seasons, one hardly expects from the Metropolitan Opera the excitement of the new and untried, either in repertoire or in production. Still, it might be argued that the chief duty of a first-rank opera house is not to dispense novelty, but to stage standard works in a fashion appropriate to the dignity of the acknowledged masterpieces and to the first-rank voices at its disposal.

In fact, because there are so few operatic institutions in this country with the resources for large casts and lavish productions, it has fallen to the Met to play a key role in preserving the operatic tradition. One indication of the company's national importance has been its Saturday matinee radio broadcasts, which over the past fifty years have introduced a great number of classics to the American public.

Recently, however, the Met has failed to live up to its role as a premier educational institution. It matters not whether we are speaking of older productions such as Guenther Schneider-Siemmsen's *Tristan und Isolde* or Paul Emile Deiber's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (both have been around for almost two decades), or of a relatively new staging, such as the 1985 Zeffirelli *Tosca*; at the Met, classics of operatic literature have lately been rendered in a way that could most generously be described as musically unconvincing.

The man behind these disappointments is none other than the Met's artistic director, James Levine, who in his nearly twenty years with the institution has evinced an intractable fixation on the individual notes of operatic scores, but a strange disregard for how the notes join together to make music.

Last winter the Met once again revived David Alden's 1959 production of Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* (1925), which may well be the oldest staging in the Met's repertoire. Under Levine's baton, this *Wozzeck* had the distinction of being wholly devoid of lyricism—an odd state of events, even given the pitfalls of live performance. In fact, this was no accident. The conductor's interpretation of this opera back in 1979, when he first introduced its performance in the German language, was also dull and dry.[1]

Levine is lucky in that this first operatic experiment in atonality is tied to a fascinating German drama; Berg's libretto, which he himself skillfully adapted from Georg Büchner's proto-modernist play,

1 By far the most beautiful recording of the work is Karl Böhm's, with Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (Wozzeck), Fritz Wunderlich (Andres), Gerhard Stolze (Hauptmann), and Evelyn Lear (Marie); Deutsche Grammophon LP 2702 023. Böhm's interpretation is meticulous and unabashedly romantic. There is also much to be said for the remarkable transparency of line in Claudio Abbado's 1987 live recording with the Vienna State Opera; Deutsche Grammophon CD 423 587-1/2. Franz Grundheber, Philip Langridge, Heinz Zednik, and Hildegard Behrens sing.

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cannot be rid of dramatic impact.[2] Levine should, moreover, be thankful that Caspar Neher's sets are timeless; starkly atmospheric, they are an appropriate complement to the drama's expressionist tendencies. If Levine failed to render *Wozzeck* properly as opera, at least on this occasion it still succeeded as theater.

If one were to give Levine the benefit of the doubt, one might surmise that his turgid interpretation of the first two scenes had something to do with a reckoning with musical modernism, or at least with a confrontation with the dramatic situation. But neither the dissonance of the score nor the incipient madness of the opera's title character—a soldier debased by his superiors and cuckolded by his mistress, Marie—is apparently what brought Levine to lose sight of the melodic line.

Levine's handling of Marie's lullaby, in the third scene, made it explicitly clear that he hadn't an inkling of how this piece goes. The lines *Mädel, was fängst Du jetzt an?/Hast ein klein Kind und kein Mann* ("Girl, what are you going to do?/ You've a child, but no husband") had none of the necessary, gentle lilt of a "cradle song," but only the heaviness of a funeral march. The expansive tempo which starts with *Ei, was frag, ich darnach* ("Oh, what do I care") was nowhere perceptible. And here, as in the rest of the ninety-minute work, one had the feeling that somewhere in Levine's inner ear is an inflexible pulse that either squares off every musical gesture or fights every attempt at plasticity, including his own; one suspects, moreover, that his approach to music is to conduct it beat by beat, rather than phrase by phrase. Only thus can one explain the strange rhythmic quirks and the fitful, senseless starts and stops that marked Levine's trudging march through the opera.

Another glaring inadequacy in Levine's interpretation of *Wozzeck* was his handling, in the tavern scenes, of the "dance numbers"—the Ländlers, waltzes, and polkas. Even if Levine was unaware of the importance of these dance rhythms in Berg's composition, one would have thought the conductor would notice that the tempo he took forced the "dancers" on stage to lift their feet in slow motion.

It is no surprise that even good singers fail to perform well under Levine's direction. Hildegard Behrens's Marie, powerful in the recent Vienna production with Claudio Abbado conducting, degenerated considerably in New York. She was unable to sustain either vocal or dramatic impact with such uncomprehending direction. (In the lyrical episodes, her voice sounded squeezed and forced.) Curiously, Graham Clark, who sang the role of the Hauptmann (captain), seemed to respond to Levine's plodding by speaking, more than by singing, his lines. Thanks to his competent diction, Clark to some extent compensated by dramatic declamation what was impossible to provide musically.

Taken together, Levine's musical shortcomings meant that he was unable to convey a sense of the melodic opulence of the work's atonal segments. But even in the tonal sections, the complex harmonic progressions were obscured. The famous transitional passage to the last scene was a case in point. It is one of the most voluptuous moments in music, and is expressly labeled by Berg "Epilogue: Invention on the key of D minor." As muddled through by Levine, it sounded light-years away from D minor, and represented a perverse understatement of the opera's climax.

Admittedly, *Wozzeck* is a difficult piece, but Levine might have made it simpler were he more sympathetic to Berg's attachment to variegated compositional forms and harmonic vocabularies, to consonance as well as dissonance, and to straightforward as well as complex rhythms. Such diversity, the models

2 The manuscript of *Woyzeck* (1836), ignored for four decades after the author's death, was deciphered by the novelist Karl Emil Franzos, who, in undertaking a critical edition of Büchner's works in the 1870s, was the first to piece the fragmentary drama together. Berg shortened the work considerably by combining some scenes and eliminating others. Even so, he remained faithful to much of Büchner's dialogue.

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of which range from Baroque to jazz in Berg's composition, accounts for the great rhetorical pathos of his operas.

Of course, the musical weaknesses that characterized the *Wozzeck* performance, unimproved in the ten years since I last saw this production, are the same ghosts that haunt every opera that Levine conducts. And they were particularly evident in the new production of Richard Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* (1843), one of the more touted attractions of the Met's winter season. Conceived by August Everding and designed by Hans Shavernoch, this staging, I regret to report, added little more than visual inanity to the musical eccentricities provided by Levine.

In the elaborate season guide published by the Met, Everding is quoted as saying he had striven to represent

> the intrusion of the supernatural into a serene and orderly bourgeois world. . . . You have to communicate the primeval fear awakened by the appearance of the phantom ship.

Well, all right. But does this explain why, for example, in the first act, the Dutchman descended what looks to be an industrial crane? Or why the second act, with its famous "Spinning Song," was set in what looks to be a turn-of-the-century SoHo sweatshop, with sewing machines substituting for spinning wheels? Or why, in the third act, the sailor's call to the helmsman, *Steuermann, lass die Wacht* ("Helmsman, leave the watch"), was staged with the helmsman already among the party on the pier, his own ship nowhere in sight?

These departures from the libretto must have prompted some thought in the Metropolitan Opera's press department. Their response to anticipated audience confusion, however, amounted to mere description of the confusion on stage:

> Shavernoch's stage designs carry out Everding's suggestion[s] by presenting the Dutchman's ship as a mammoth steel prow. Ice and frost permeate the scenes, with a giant iceberg looming next to Daland's [the heroine's father's] ship, while prospects through the windows of his house—here presented as a sailing loft—look equally frosty.

And just in case we *still* could not trace the relationship between Everding's purposes and the resulting set, the Met's season guide added a little socio-historical support to its assertions:

> Elemental forces, both natural and man-made [*sic*], threaten the romanticism with which Wagner and his contemporaries, facing the industrial revolution, still sought to interpret their world.

What an utterly ingenuous admission of the confused aims of this production!

Of course, the most serious problems here were still the musical ones, the most salient being Levine's tendencies to drag the longer melodic lines, and to square off dotted rhythms by attacking them with a crude precision. These two tendencies are symptomatic of Levine's heavy-handed musical approach—even to the more leavened operatic works. And they had the effect here of bringing this piece—a fragile combination of Weberian influence and anticipations of the later, heavy-textured, *Musikdramen* Wagner—into an imbalance.

Wagner was not yet thirty when he adapted the *Dutchman* from a version of the legend found in Heinrich Heine's *Memoirs of Herr von Schnabelewopski* (1835). Heine's version is tongue-in-cheek, a curious send-up of Romanticism. In it, Herr Schnabelewopski recounts the plot of a play he attended, a tale of a sea captain doomed to eternal roving, but redeemed by the love of a faithful woman. As he unravels the play's story line, Schnabelewopski, in comic counterpoint, dallies with a young lady he has seen in the audience. And to cap this farce, Schnabelewopski draws this facetious moral from the play: Women should take care not to marry Flying Dutchmen.

Wagner, of course, was attracted to

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precisely those elements of the *Dutchman* story that Heine lampoons: the demonic, adventurous character of the Dutchman, and the self-sacrifice of Senta, the virginal heroine. Indeed, Wagner took the story very seriously. But this does not mean that he overcame its flat, two-dimensional aspect, an aspect closer to adventure tale than to high drama. The *Dutchman* score, while gripping and meticulously constructed, is hardly subtle. Perhaps the best testimony to this fact is its appeal to adolescents. Indeed, in German-speaking lands, the *Dutchman* is considered the ideal "first" opera.

To attribute to this work the musical profundity of the later Wagner is a serious mistake. There is simply too much *oom-pah-pah* in the *Dutchman*. Yet Levine conducted the opera as if it were the *Ring*. He indulged his fascination with the darker characters (the Dutchman and Senta) and their big moments; and he luxuriated in these to the extent of putting every other element of the opera at a disadvantage. The result is that he robbed the entire work of its dramatic unity and of its continual musical fresh starts. An aria such as Daland's appeal to Senta to marry the Dutchman, *Mögst Du, mein Kind*? ("Would you, my child?"), which has all the jolly charm the early Wagner could muster so well, came off pallid and silly, as did the character of the (normally) earthy Daland.

In this production, Levine's concentration on the roles of the Dutchman and Senta had particularly bad consequences. Janis Martin's Senta was, simply, weak. Her voice had a disconcerting wobble, and her acting seemed to consist mainly of striking the air with outstretched arm.

The case of Robert Hale (the Dutchman) is interesting. Under Levine's direction, he habitually hung on to his consonants for what seemed an eternity. His voice, moreover, sounded strained, as if he were having difficulty hearing himself over the orchestra. It was Hale's debut, so he might have been nervous. But one could not help thinking, during his solos, that his vocal problems had something to do with Levine's overbearing dramatic style and unwillingness to move on with the musical line.

A week later, under Donald Runnicles's much more straightforward conducting, Robert Hale gave us a very different, and musically more substantial, Dutchman. He let go of his consonants, revealing excellent German diction, and sang his part with fluid assurance.

To put it bluntly, young singers do not perform at their best under Levine's direction. Nor do Levine's eccentric musical gestures, his boring and lugubrious interpretations, have much to offer the serious audience for opera. The Met's publicity office, however, would have us believe that Levine is genuinely popular. More likely he is merely tolerated by the knowledgeable, and accepted uncritically by the Met's general audience—tourists, occasional operagoers, and listeners at home. But would not this general audience in particular—composed, as it is, largely of opera neophytes—be better served by more authentic live renditions of the literature?

The Met's season guide proudly points out Levine's ubiquitous presence in the house. He has, in its words, "taken charge of more performances than any other conductor in company history." In doing so, he has probably taken charge of our national operatic life. It is a situation upon which the interested public might well be advised to ruminate.

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Books

Beautiful loser

by John Simon

It is not surprising that, in his new book on Kafka, Pietro Citati has written a psychobiography; what writer is more suited to such an approach than Franz Kafka?[1] His not quite forty-one years on earth were largely uneventful on the outside and frantically, frighteningly dramatic within. Erich Heller has noted about Kafka, "I suppose we have to thank God that he blessed us all with a lesser degree of understanding," and for "understanding" we may just as well read "sensitivity." Kafka's apparatus for feeling and comprehending worked without surcease, waking and sleeping, even when nothing much was happening to, with, or around its owner. And to record the work of such an apparatus, one writes a psychobiography.

But what exactly is psychobiography, such as Citati has written here? It is one writer's study of another's impressions, reactions, ideas, beliefs, thoughts, and emotions as that other experienced them and wrote them down, freshly invented by, or painfully dredged up from, his psyche. For this, a framework is needed, and Citati surrounds his examination of what Kafka wrote in his fiction, diaries, and letters with bits of straight biography, just enough to put the psychobiography into an existential context. The method works, on the whole, but it has its problems. At times, it leads us into expectations of a full critical study; at others, into hope of more biographical data. And it leaves us a trifle hungry in both directions.

Citati presupposes readers who already know a thing or three about Kafka; his is not a course for beginners. Well, why not? Still, when there is a sudden reference to "beloved Klopstock," even a perfectly civilized reader might think of the eighteenth-century poet rather than of the young medical student, Kafka's worshiper and protégé. And even someone who has read *The Castle*, but not very recently, might be thrown by an unprepared-for encounter with "the road that takes [K.] to Brunswick's wife" and that "can only prove to be the road to failure." A little explanation, a little memory-refresher, is never amiss, even in a psychobiography—a genre that, by the way, goes also by the name of psychography. But a psychograph, as the Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary tells us, is "a photographic image attributed to a supernatural or spiritualistic cause." Given the elusive, mysterious, wraithlike nature of much of Kafka's life and work, psychography, in either sense of the word, may well apply to a study of Franz Kafka.

Psychobiography, however, has been known to roam freely backward and forward in time, and it is to Citati's credit that his book proceeds in orderly, chronological fashion. When it comes to acquainting us with the thought of an artist—just as, for that matter, with his life—there is no

1 *Kafka*, by Pietro Citati; translated from the Italian by Raymond Rosenthal; Knopf, 320 pages, $22.95.

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substitute for chronological progression. Even writers who change very little in the course of time must be understood from the standpoint of their age. What is one thing in a twenty-year-old is something very different in someone aged forty or sixty; and the work or deed of a middle-aged person assumes a different coloration when viewed against the background of that person's youthful writings and actions. Kafka, who certainly wasn't one of your great shedders of former selves, nevertheless could not have written *The Castle* or "The Burrow" at the outset of his life and career, and it behooves any study of his work, however psychobiographic, to respect history, which is another name for chronology.

Let me say flat out that I admire Citati (who is a respected Italian journalist turning into a novelist of note, as well as the author of well-received books on Goethe, Tolstoy, and—gulp!—Katherine Mansfield) for his easy familiarity with Kafka's oeuvre and for his ability to juxtapose passages from the fiction, diaries, and letters to good, often compelling, effect. This said, however, it must also be pointed out that there is not a little that is windy, unfocused, or simply excessive about this basically intelligent book, which finally leaves me unsatisfied. Although the jacket copy describes Citati as "one of Europe's finest literary critics," the great man does not always find the pregnant formulation or vivid image that produces an indelible imprint on the reader's mind.

On the other hand, he can write evocative passages with ease. Take the description of Kafka's first meeting with Felice Bauer, fiancée number one. Citati embeds several of Kafka's own phrases in the account quite seamlessly and evokes the rather humdrum encounter with great tangibility and vivacity. But he concludes: "Was Felice without a soul? Or was she without sin? Yet that empty, absent face fired Kafka's furibund imagination in a way that nothing else did." "Empty, absent face" is good, but it is a paraphrase; "fired Kafka's furibund imagination" is less impressive; and "in a way that nothing else did" is unworthy of one of Europe's finest literary critics. Moreover, the paragraph contains a direct quotation from Kafka that puts all else to shame: Felice's "bony and empty face, which openly wore its emptiness." The truth is that poor Felice Bauer, as all available pictures attest, was on that side of plain that borders on homely. Citati could have told us this, instead of reducing us to dependence on Kafka's description, which is, inevitably, extenuating.

Now here is Citati on the novel *Amerika*: "An impenetrable silence descends on the page. The more tragic events are, the stronger becomes the reticence and omission: every time another writer would pour out with abundance, [Kafka] offers us the frightening absence of the void." This is solid, evocative writing. And Citati continues (he has been discussing the disappearance of the Narrator from Kafka's fiction): "Without the help of the Narrator, without interpretations, subjected to omissions, absences, tricks, reticences and restrictions of the field, we journey through Kafka's great books as we would through the very body of the Enigma. When shall we ever be able to understand? When shall we be able to choose among the thousand contradictory opinions? When shall we be able to know the truth without shadows?" Fine; this conveys clearly enough Kafka's lack of clarity.

But now Citati changes gears: "A final paradox [whose: Kafka's? Citati's? God's?] decrees that Kafka's books are among literature's least difficult." This is a paradox indeed, in light of the foregoing. How will Citati explain it? "There is nothing subjective, arbitrary or doubtful in them: *Amerika* is not the truth according to Karl, or *The Trial* the truth according to Joseph K." Wait a moment! On the preceding page, Citati told us about *The Trial* that, "In reality, it is not the Narrator who is speaking: Joseph K. is thinking, through a Narrator's voice, and a naïve reader will find it hard to understand that he is not at all innocent. Kafka . . . is not satisfied to omit what the character does not know, but intentionally deceives us, putting us on the wrong track.

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The art of trickery, which he knew as did few others, contributes to the Enigma."

If the Narrator is just a dummy for Joseph K. to ventriloquize through, *The Trial* is precisely "the truth according to Joseph K.," the very thing Citati denies on the next page. And how can this perfected art of trickery, this not enabling us to understand, this having to choose among a thousand contradictory opinions, be consistent, even paradoxically, with books that are "among literature's least difficult"? We eagerly await the explanation.

"Dickens is hard to understand, not Kafka," Citati continues. Dickens? He must be joking. Without explaining, he goes on: "We have only to keep in mind all the events and characters of *Amerika* or *The Trial* or *The Castle*." *Only*? What does he take our minds for? The files of a Kafka scholar? Computers? Who can keep all that in mind as he reads along? Not just the "naïve reader" will be deceived here. And what does this only-keeping-in-mind consist of? "Establish[ing] a living relationship among [the novels], a plot without end among all the words Kafka has left on paper." *All* the words? It gets better and better. "Only this is needed: an art of patience. If all the threads are really pulled tight [this sounds like one of the tasks Venus inflicted on Psyche], the truth of *Amerika* or *The Trial* or *The Castle*—a truth that stands far above or lies much deeper than Karl, Joseph K., K. and Kafka—will burst forth by itself, dazzlingly." I may, of course, be one of those naïve, deceived readers, but either I haven't been able to pull all those threads tight enough or else that eruptive truth was too dazzling for my Semelean eyes; in any case, and without paradox, I maintain: Dickens is easy, Kafka is hard. Citati, though perhaps not the master trickster Kafka was, seems to be pulling the wool of one of his paradoxes over our eyes.

Yet what is the main thrust of this psychobiography? It is encapsulated in the following two assertions. First, that "At the beginning of Kafka's theology stands a great omission: no one says that the Law is the house of God, or that the Court is an emanation of God, even though the superscription IN FRONT OF THE DOOR persuades us that we are dealing only with him. The omission does not surprise us, because any consequential mysticism, Jewish or Christian, in the end leaps beyond the name of God. So then, can we attribute the Law and the Court to God?" The answer is yes, "even though, in so doing, we are committing a betrayal, because the lack of the name creates a void, an absence, a kind of death in God's body, which we replace with the fullness of a name." I am not familiar with the leapfrogging habits of Jewish and Christian mystics, though a Jew might forgo the naming of God for far more obvious reasons. Similarly, I am not sure whether that superscription as encountered in *The Trial* has such a clearly theistic implication—though it may well have. But I am impressed with Citati's fastidiousness, which confesses to a betrayal before it proceeds to commit it. Still, it is a tenable position that, as we read later in the book, "Separate truths no longer interested [Kafka]—only metaphysics, theology: God, nothing but God."

In another passage, Citati offers his second major assertion: "Suddenly, at the end of 1912, [Kafka] was assailed by his Oedipus complex, whose import and implications he did not know." Eventually, "the Oedipus complex settled in the depths of Kafka's mind and conscience; it expanded, became more complicated, accepted succor from all parts of the soul and culture, until it was transformed into the most grandiose and complex theological system in the modern world." If we discount some of his more grandiose asseverations, Citati is saying that Kafka's fear and hate and love of his father—Hermann, the tough, brutal, sarcastic, bullying son of a butcher—led to his envisioning God in the image of that father. Accordingly, God became a cruel ironist, unforgiving and unattainable, offering man opportunities that he could hardly recognize, let alone use, and thus thrusting him into a nameless, all-pervasive, unpardonable guilt.

Good enough. The main interpretations

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of Kafka have been Marxist, Freudian, or Judeo-Christian, with the accent on "Judeo." The first perceives him as perpetrating an assault on the Hapsburg monarchy, or any other tyrannical system, in terms of a set of bureaucratic metaphors so close to the Imperial truth as to be hardly metaphors at all. The second school of thought conceives of Kafka as a psychologically handicapped person, unable to come to terms with his father and mother, and so incurring a lifelong malaise about people, especially women. The third theory, leaning on Kafka's tortuous, changing relationship with Judaism and Zionism, views our author as a man obsessed with sin, with moral and devotional failure, and tormenting himself and his characters accordingly. There is no reason for seeing those predicaments as mutually exclusive, and they can be readily represented as three concentric vessels made of some porous material, so that the liquid in one will permeate all.

What Citati has done is to dismiss the Marxist interpretation altogether and then strengthen the causal relationship between the two remaining ones. I am unable to say whether this view is entirely original, but Citati certainly makes it persuasive. Still, as long as he insists on the Oedipal paradigm, why does he not even try to make a case for the mother-son aspect of that complex? As a result, Kafka's bizarre behavior to women, though conjured up in all its manifestations and ramifications, is not clearly explained. (Citati does slight fiancée number two, Julie Wohryzek, but this is understandable in view of our scant information about her; Klaus Wagenbach's thorough pictorial documentation, *Franz Kafka: Pictures of a Life* [1984], cannot turn up any sort of likeness of Julie.) Here such deserving recent English-language Kafka biographies as Ronald Hayman's and, especially, Ernst Pawel's can be helpful.

Citati is perfectly within his right to concentrate on the three novels and a handful of shorter works: both the obvious ones, such as "The Metamorphosis," "The

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Burrow," and "Investigations of a Dog," and such a less obvious one as "The Silence of the Sirens," the whole demonstration supported by ample use of the diaries and correspondence. The choice of the two-page but ripe-to-bursting "Silence of the Sirens" is especially felicitous, since it conveys to perfection Kafka's more-than-Odyssean deviousness as storyteller and human being. A deviousness that, to be sure, may be regarded as salutary for a creature so utterly devoid of other defenses.

Typically, Citati launches on a discussion of this short-short story without stating its title—perhaps a further example of the mystical overleaping of names. He then proceeds to a subtle and detailed reading of the story, which he appends to a similarly sensitive interpretation of "The Great Wall of China," and uses both to illuminate one of Kafka's more extraordinary notions, that pretended death is the gods' ultimate stratagem for entrapping us, and to his way of dealing with this contingency. Citati is no less incisive and ingenious in several other of his interpretations, notably those of *Amerika* and "The Metamorphosis." Of the latter, he says: "No bestial metamorphosis—neither in Ovid nor in Dante [the faulty grammar is the translator's]—has ever been so meticulous, so lenticular, so capable of involving us irremediably." That is a fine, sweeping formulation; still, a critic might be expected to ask himself how relevant a genre is bestial metamorphosis.

It is, no doubt, an appropriate subject for one as apart and aloof, as awkwardly but also happily withdrawn, as Kafka was much of the time. And indeed, for Kafka's remoteness and evasiveness, Citati is not lacking in well-chosen and shrewdly marshaled demonstrations. The most mundane, but not the least powerful, of these is Kafka's fear, during his contented rustication in Zürau with his favorite sister, of undressing in the presence of a cat he had taken into his room. Citati is somewhat less explicit about the (mostly spiritual) sadomasochism that enters into Kafka's relationship with women. Thus, in Kafka's own terrible words, "This morning for the first time after a long time [Translator: Why not "while"?] the joy of imagining a knife twisted in my heart." And, even more pointedly (so to speak), in a letter to Milena Jesenská, probably the most important woman in his life: "Love is for me the fact that you are for me the knife with which I probe myself." And again: "Yes, torture is very important to me, it is my chief occupation to be tortured and to torture." Related to these are such further passages as Citati rightly adduces, e.g., "When I want to feel nauseated, I have only to imagine putting an arm around a woman's thighs," and (in the *Diaries*) "Coitus as punishment for the happiness of being together."

There is an even richer sampling of Kafka's nonsexual eccentricities of thought, word, and deed, as in the plea to the beloved Milena, "I beg you . . . do not surprise me by arriving from the side and from behind." I am glad that Citati is, finally, not afraid to write, "His neurasthenia, anguish, insomnia and terror of insomnia, his nameless fear and inability to decide grew day by day, right to the brink of madness." Unpleasant as this is, it needed to be said: "brink" may even be a euphemism. Though Citati always tries to be kind, he does not become wishy-washy: Joseph K.'s "defense against his guilt . . . becomes, as in Kafka's own case, a substitute for existence." "The category of waiting is at the heart of Kafka's world: God's waiting, mankind's waiting." Again: "Never, in modern literature, had evil perhaps ruled over so gigantic a space and cast so sinister a shadow on the universe." These are good insights, though often tripped up by Raymond Rosenthal, the translator. Note how awkwardly that "perhaps" is placed in the last quotation. Even worse is "an airiness of the hand that perhaps he never again found," which sounds positively foreign. Rosenthal has similar problems with "also": "Also these little girls are part of the Court"; "the gift of making also us supernaturally right." Also where is the copy editor at perhaps such times?

Rosenthal's grammar and syntax are appalling: "if a night or a day were troubled,"

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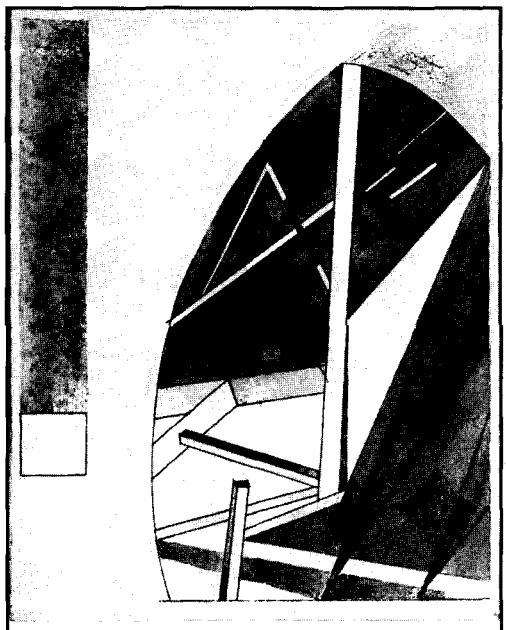
where neither a plural nor a subjunctive is called for; "As in the Gospels, Kafka seized upon a theological wisdom"; "But it is barely the shadow of a temptation, like the one he experienced with Brunelda; he unconsciously removes them [?] from his mind." There is the awful back formation "intuits," the low-life "nothing in the world but her and him," apples in an apartment (in "The Metamorphosis") rolling along the "pavement," crevices opening up between Kafka's "phrases," where *frasi* must mean "sentences." And the tin ear, as in the jingle "dark Ark," so easily avoidable. And the ignorance, which translates the German *Propyläen Verlag* as "the Propilei edition," though here Citati's own mistake must have led Rosenthal astray.

For Citati himself can be quite careless. What are we to make of an image such as "he dug down and down—which for him was the only way to fly with firm, secure wings around the unattainable mountaintops"? And the overwriting, as in "This is an undulating, melodic, floreal [flowery?], suspended, cryptic, angelic prose: an unreal efflorescence of images which spring more from an overexcited imagination than from the mind, until the exhausted stylization of a gesture suddenly shatters it"? Again: "His is the crime without name and without motive, the ineluctable crime, neither distant nor close, that no one committed even at the earth's dawn, and which can weigh on many men, like a halo of darkness, like a stain they will never be able to wash from heart and hands." Too floreal by half, that.

Citati can get as obsessive as Kafka himself, as when he insists that "We would like to know everything—the color of the sky, the bright or stormy clouds, the position of [Kafka's] desk, the quality of his writing paper, the furniture in the room, the number of the nocturnal passersby—about those fourteen exceedingly dense days" that gave birth to *Amerika*, the beginning of *The Trial*, and all of "In the Penal Colony." But would the quality of the paper and the number of passersby really tell us anything significant?



El Lissitzky, *Proun Study*, 1919/20

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Such obsessions, I suppose, are the occupational hazard of psychobiographers. Yet, at the same time, Citati can also be quite careless about detail, as when he tells us that Kafka had met Milena in Prague in October 1919, and contradicts himself two pages later: "Without really meeting, the two souls were inflamed by each other." Unless one or the other lover did not carry his soul with him at all times.

The discussion of Kafka's ultimate novelistic masterpiece, *The Castle*, is just but elementary, e.g., the observation that the God of *The Castle*, unlike that of *The Trial*, does not accuse, investigate, or pass atrocious sentences. "This new God . . . does not impose anything . . . this passive, ironic, indifferent God . . . does not summon us, has mislaid any relationship with us." Similarly, Citati notes that K. is—or assumes the role of—a land surveyor (which Rosenthal renders misleadingly as "agricultural surveyor"), and interprets this rightly as K.'s wishing to know, presuming to measure the divine rationally. But he doesn't take the next step: "Surveyor" in German is *Vermesser*, a noun whose adjectival form, *vermessen*, means "presumptuous," or "impudent."

Again, the novel ends abruptly with an episode in which Gardena, the hostess of the inn, shows K. her large wardrobe with its multitude of sumptuous dresses—rather out of character for this blowzy giantess. Granted, the novel was to have gone on quite a bit beyond that; the ending, as with all Kafka novels, is merely where the author's energy or interest ran out. Still, it is such an odd passage, and it *is* the ending we are stuck with, so Citati should not have passed over it in silence. Especially since, earlier, he gives us the incident when Kafka, visiting Milena in Vienna, is struck by "her room, dominated by a most imposing wardrobe closet"; on their last day together, she wears a "madly beautiful" dress. There is a connection here—even the names, Milena and Gardena, rhyme. Just what the connection is is for the psychobiographer to know, and for us to find out by reading him.

After having surveyed every nook and cranny of Kafkaland, after having read fifty-two previous studies of Kafka, after receiving advice on his book from no less formidable an authority than Federico Fellini, Citati comes up with an uneven work that ends on a rather too prosaically dying fall. Still, he does shed light along the way on an endlessly elusive, endlessly fascinating figure—a man, an artist who, as he correctly says, "could not endure happiness."

In her fine book about Kafka, translated into English as *As Lonely as Franz Kafka* (1985), the French critic Marthe Robert speaks of him as "a prey to the special sort of sadness that comes from failure." And whatever else he also was, Kafka remains the patron saint, the publicist, the great explicator of lonely losers. His works crawl with all kinds of losers: servile and heroic, pathetic and philosophic, resigned and defiant—sometimes even cheerful and winning. In literature certainly, but even in life perhaps, Kafka has made the loser respectable. Not heartbreaking or hilarious—others, before him, did that—but respectable.

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reviewed by C. H. Sisson

Emerging from vast textual *corvées*, including the joint editorship of editions of Shakespeare's *Works* in the original and in modernized spelling, Gary Taylor must be not only a man of great industry but one who knows something about his author.

It is perhaps understandable that a young textual scholar who has been involved in such labors should hanker after some more reckless employment, "beyond the intellectual enclosure of Shakespeare specialists." Taylor was so moved that his publisher can describe *Reinventing Shakespeare* as "bold, provocative, irreverent." "Who was Shake-

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speare, and is he really as great as everyone says?" It is still the publisher haranguing us, and the reply can only be that what "everybody" means by saying that Shakespeare is "great" must amount to precious little. To Taylor himself, what you and I might mean by it is neither here nor there; his ideas are on a grander scale. "What 'Shakespeare' means in and to any given period" depends upon a number of "decisions," most of which are happily beyond the knowledge of the ordinary reader or member of an audience and which can hardly be more than sketchily within the knowledge even of such as Gary Taylor.

One is, of course, used to academics asserting that it is frivolous to read old authors for the pleasure they can give and for the substance which more ignorant generations supposed them to contain. Taylor shifts attention from the work altogether to the *image* of the author. His perspectives are those of the advertising man. His subject is not Shakespeare but "the mechanisms of cultural renown." Renown? It is apparently made up of the sweepings of "the annals of criticism, the theatre, and many other disciplines." What the most boring and wrong-headed of critics, and the flashiest of actors and theater directors, think and do, all, apparently, contribute to this—theoretically—public reputation. In fact, no one in any age ever thought of Shakespeare like that. Then Gary Taylor came. "Shakesperotics," as he wittily calls his method, is as he says a big subject—too large indeed. "It embraces everything that a society does in the name—variously spelled—of Shakespeare." But when did "society" ever do anything about him?

"When did people decide that Shakespeare was the greatest English dramatist? The greatest English poet? The greatest writer who ever lived? . . . . On what evidence, by what reasoning, did they justify their verdict?" These and the like questions Taylor throws out in his introduction. The simple answer to the first two questions is that Ben Jonson—himself rather well qualified—seems to have recognized Shakespeare's quality from the first, or at any rate from the date of the First Folio (1623), and if it took most of the rest of the world a generation or two to be of the same opinion, there is nothing very surprising about that: most of them, being incapable of firsthand judgment, could only repeat the opinion parrot-fashion. And as to the question, "by what reasoning did they justify their verdict?" the answer must be that no reasoning could justify statements of that kind: they are simply not that kind of statement. Poets are recognized by those who can recognize poetry; the "mechanics of cultural renown," which is Taylor's subject, is something quite different, having only a marginal bearing on "greatness." The relative obscurity of Dante, during several centuries, tells us more about those ages than it does about the poet.

So it is, *mutatis mutandis*, with the notoriety of Shakespeare. It must be said that Taylor's historical chapters, which make up most of the book, are vitiated by a profound confusion as to what he is supposed to be doing. Perhaps he comes nearest to being frank about his concerns when he says, toward the end of the volume, that "if we believe that Shakespeare's work was perfect and encompassing, we cannot edit it." Editors, like other scholars, annoy one another, but Taylor really should not let the bile which has no doubt collected over his years in that trade spill over into denigration of the author himself, or into dark suspicions that his readers are "overestimating Shakespeare's importance and uniqueness." He professes to be concerned lest too much enthusiasm should "harm Shakespeare himself," but he should have born in mind that the poet has survived very well in spite of the eccentricities of generations of editors and critics, and that those who have read with appreciation either the First Folio or more recent editions must have approached him, as they would any other poet, through a few convincing lines which gave them an appetite for more. The real impact of an author's greatness, with Shakespeare as with

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Dante or any other, is felt in a few lines or a few words: how far it is followed depends on the capacity of the reader. The "collective image of Shakespeare," and our talk about it, are of no more significance than a Gallup poll.

The book begins with a chapter on the Restoration, a period in which pollsters and advertising men were a less prominent part of society than they are at present, and it is hardly surprising that the odds and ends Taylor has selected to sketch the taste of the period hardly amount to a "collective image." There is some attempt to give the gist of what had happened during the preceding years, but the reader would do better with Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion*.

Certainly, without acquiring somehow a much fuller picture of the religious and political complexities of post-Reformation England, such matters as the closing of the theaters, and the changes in outlook signified by the establishment of the Royal Society—both of which Taylor touches on—can have only the most superficial meaning. In any case, Pepys's delight in seeing actresses' legs, the superior popularity of Beaumont and Fletcher, and even the success of Thomas Betterton in putting over his own version of *Hamlet*, have no bearing at all on the question of Shakespeare's greatness and uniqueness which proccupies Taylor so persistently, and so confusedly, throughout the book. It seems odd, too, to take some fustian about the "mobbled queen" from the play within the play in *Hamlet*, and Dryden's discussion of it, to illustrate the deficiencies of the poet.

The next chapter takes us to 1709. The pattern is much the same as before. We are given a few faint indications about the nature of Whig influence. We are told bits about Addison and Steele, and about Jacob Tonson's business interests; there is more money now in bookselling than in theater management. Throughout the whole story runs what can only be called Taylor's misapprehension as to the nature of literature and its uses. While "the practice of theatrical adaptation . . . coupled with Tonson's technique for appropriating reputations," as he says, "contributed to the public remodeling and transmission of Shakespeare's plays," that has nothing to do with the literary value of the poet and in no way makes sense of his conclusion that "by the end of the eighteenth century Shakespeare had been, by such means, insinuated into the network of English literature." The literature of the past is there, waiting for discovery, whatever the antics of fashion or the habits of editors, publishers, universities, or, in appropriate cases, theatrical managers, and the health of literature depends on those who can make such discoveries for themselves. Times change; discoveries change. What does not change is the fact that the only serious readers are those who pay no attention to reputations and look for work that interests them.

There are further chapters entitled "1790," "Victorian Values," "Good-bye to All That" (the early twentieth century), and "Present Tense" (in which period theatrical and critical follies are certainly no less abundant than usual). The final chapter is called "Singularity, and throughout it," Taylor is pursued by his morbid fear that we may be overestimating Shakespeare. He does not want to be thought to be one of those editors who think "it is unsafe to emend anything, because Shakespeare is so much smarter than you that your cleverness today will inevitably look like stupidity tomorrow."

For my part, I am willing to concede that Gary Taylor is smarter than Shakespeare. The man who went back to Stratford when his work was done had compensating strengths. He was certainly more relaxed than our editor. And he did after all invent Shakespeare. None of the reinventors has done anything remotely comparable. And our editor has invented only Gary Taylor.

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Sympathy for the devil

Abram Tertz (Andrei Sinyavsky)
Goodnight! Translated from the Russian, and with an introduction, by Richard Lourie. Viking, 364 pages, $22.95

reviewed by Lauren Weiner

The arrest of Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel in September 1965 marked a new era for intellectuals in the Soviet Union. It meant that the state had resumed, after Khrushchev's fall, the jailing of writers who opposed the regime. But in the opening pages of *Goodnight!* we are given to understand that the KGB has at least temporarily changed its tactics since the bad old days of Stalin. Sinyavsky, a respected academic, has been nabbed off a Moscow street but is assured that he will not be beaten up. Physical torture hasn't been used since before the Twentieth Party Congress of 1956, sniff his interrogators.

Judging the truth of this claim is a little tough, to say the least, but one infers that it was true in Sinyavsky's case. Apparently his six years of hard labor in the Gulag for "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda" did not include the corporal punishment that Anatoly Marchenko, for example, was to die of in 1986.

With an ironic tone that shades from bitter to giddy and back again, Sinyavsky conjures in this autobiography-cum-fantasy-cum-novel a Soviet system that is not less oppressive for being largely gore-free. *Goodnight!* is a rambunctious and rambling series of vignettes about the labor camps, about the trial of Sinyavsky and Daniel (the latter was sentenced to five years in the camps), about the KGB's use of Sinyavsky as a Cold War pawn during his university days, about his father's sufferings under Stalin, and about the man who tipped off the police to the real identities of the two pseudonymous writers who in 1959 began clandestinely sending their "seditious" fiction, poetry, and criticism to the West for publication.

It took several years to unmask these two audacious "imperialist hirelings" who dared to follow Khrushchev's lead and criticize Stalin. Stalin had ended his days rounding up Jews involved in the supposed "Doctors' Plot" against his life. So, to add insult to injury, Sinyavsky chose a Jewish nom de plume, Abram Tertz. (Interestingly, his friend Daniel, who actually was a Jew, wrote as the non-Jewish Nikolai Arzhak.) The protests surrounding their celebrated trial were the first rumblings of the dissident movement of the Sixties and Seventies.

As to why Sinyavsky continues to use the Tertz persona in this book—the Russian version of which was published in Paris, his adopted home, in 1984—the author indicates that he has projected the rebellious and creative aspects of his personality onto Tertz, and has grown quite attached to his alter ego. I must confess I found the continuance of the game a bit coy. I also found myself asking why, at this distance in time, Stalin himself continues to bear almost the entire weight of the author's anti-totalitarianism. (Khrushchev occasionally subjected writers, if not to kangaroo trials and labor camps, then to psychiatric wards and exile.)

It seems that a man who, astrologically speaking, was "born under the 'Stalin-Kirov-Zhdanov-Hitler-Stalin' constellation" in 1925 has little choice in what occupies his imagination. Those post-revolutionary children who grew up in the Komsomol, who fought in World War II, as Daniel did, were rejecting a system whose founding ideals they and their families had long believed in. Moreover, Sinyavsky's dissent came after he was drawn into complicity with a regime that had betrayed those ideals. Hence his sympathy—in all its variegated forms, sincere, facetious, and everything in between—for the devil.

"We knew idealists of the highest purity and caliber, people who were kind by nature and who were proud of their denunciations, made without any intent of personal gain," he writes. The "we" refers to himself and his boyhood friend Seryozha, who would later betray him and Daniel but who, for the

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moment, is a tutor on Communists, and on how "they had faith. They wept but they had faith. They slaughtered people, but they had faith. 'Then, weeping and weeping, he chopped off the man's head,' said S. with a little laugh, quoting from a medieval Japanese novel about Samurai. (Really, well put!)"

Elsewhere Sinyavsky merrily describes how some of his captors even attempted a nice bedside manner. One of them offered our hapless defendant some "good advice . . . not as a KGB investigator, just as a person with some experience of life." In a monologue he returns the favor, lecturing the agents who ran the dragnet about how they might have tracked him down more efficiently ("Why increase expense by having people hang around foreign publishing houses . . . why risk valuable agents—all for the sake of stealing an entirely ordinary typescript?").

He makes a comedy of the interrogations, spinning sarcastic scenes about "the basic goodheartedness of those who punish us." Neither he nor Daniel would oblige the state with a guilty plea and public confession. This ruined everything for the put-upon apparatchiki in charge of the trial, which was "supposed to be a present to the party from the KGB on the occasion of the 23rd Congress." They railed at him:

> You're the screw-up! You're to blame for it all! Meanwhile, those people were working on your case, without taking a day off or even time to shave, when they would have liked to be running to the store. And while people are rotting away in cells and camps, they were hammering away, toiling indefatigably, hatching a golden egg. An Easter egg. And now it's broken. A mouse ran by, hit the egg with its tail, and smashed it.

The noblest embodiment of the revolutionary ideal for Sinyavsky was his father. Donat Evgenevich Sinyavsky—an aristocrat who married a peasant, an old Socialist Revolutionary (not a Bolshevik)—was jailed for nine months in 1951 as an accused "American spy." (His American connection was that he had dispensed U.S.-made supplies to provincial schools in a famine relief program during the 1920s.) The detention of his dignified, impecunious father, one of "the last Mohicans of the revolution," was Sinyavsky's Kronstadt. Donat Evgenevich had not been beaten; but what, exactly, had been done to him? After he was released and exiled to his birthplace of Syzran, he took his son to the remotest part of the oak forest they often hunted in together, and quietly told him he believed his very thoughts were being electronically monitored by the authorities. With exquisite care, Sinyavsky lays out for us the possibilities: Either this supremely rational man had been broken, was going mad . . . or he was right, and the state really had figured out a way to tap into one's brain.

Many of the Tertz/Sinyavsky stories are concerned with mind invasion. The narrators are often paranoiacs who might, on the other hand, be robots. In the 1963 novel *The Makepeace Experiment*, the narrator writes out the plot under the compelling hand of an unseen power representing Stalin. The story "You and I" (1959) is told not by the victim, but by the one who is performing the surveillance. The conspirator "I" is the key figure in the scheme to entrap the engineer "You," who senses that somebody is out to frame him as an enemy of the people. "I" ends up going to bed with the woman unsuccessfully used as bait in the scheme, and he is tormented by the unstoppable flow of "You's" overheard thoughts into his own consciousness. Only the suicide of "You" finally releases the oppressed oppressor from his torment.

Sinyavsky had himself been the bait in a KGB effort to suborn one of his university schoolmates, Hélène Peltier-Zamoyska, the daughter of a French naval attaché. The last chapter of *Goodnight!* gives a convoluted account of his cooperation with Soviet intelligence, a cooperation that apparently overlapped, at least in part, with his father's prison term. Sinyavsky does not make clear the extent of his relations with Peltier-

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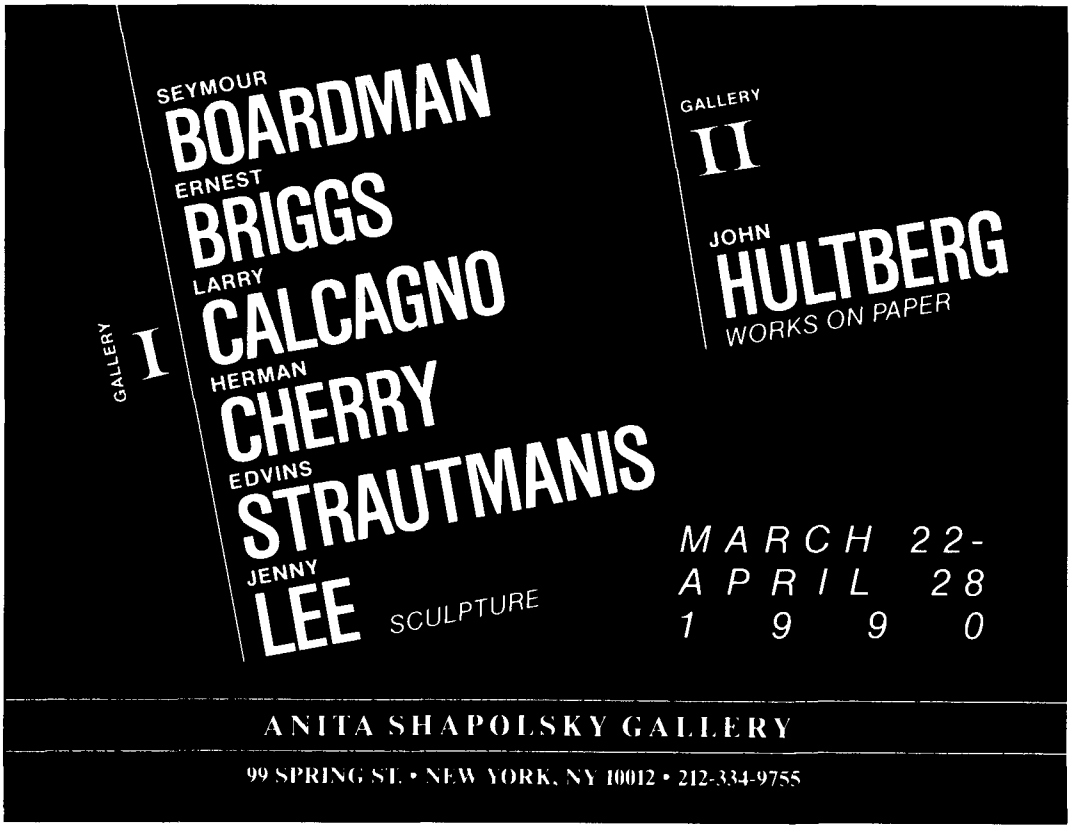

Zamoyska. What is clear is that he managed to warn her of what was going on; the episode has a surprisingly benign ending. And one could say Sinyavsky got the last laugh, for Peltier-Zamoyska later became Tertz's and Arzhak's secret conduit to the émigré press in Paris and *Encounter* magazine in London.

In his helpful introduction, translator Richard Lourie ascribes to the author's Christian faith his enthusiasm for trying out the enemy's point of view, and for sounding a note of forgiveness here and there throughout the pages of *Goodnight!* Indeed there is a striking element of religiosity in this book—that is, once the reader cottons to the fact that the Christian references are not a continuation, but an interruption, of the general satire. But there are certainly other factors involved in Sinyavsky's lack—often, of course, only a feigned lack—of ill will toward the totalitarian system.

One factor is his aesthetic principle of using a light touch, one filled with paradox and indirection. He grew up on socialist realist didacticism and reacted violently against it. "Art is moral, not by preaching goodness, but because it starts in a secret admission of love," wrote Sinyavsky in an unpublished essay.[1] "It seems to me that the great satirists such as Swift, Gogol, or Saltykov-Schedrin as artists loved their monsters."

Thus does he attempt to capture his love for Seryozha, the monster who gave Abram Tertz and Nikolai Arzhak away:

---

1 This essay, "Art in a Totalitarian World," was read by Sinyavsky at a conference, "The Role of the Writer in Contemporary Society," sponsored by the University of Chicago's John M. Olin Center (Marlboro, Vermont, August 1984). In it, Sinyavsky also criticizes one of his Christian brethren for going in for moralism. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn is not named, but one imagines it is he who reminds Sinyavsky of "a peasant who would be plowing the soil muttering to himself that everyone should take an example from him."

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> For all his virtues, S. was a phenomenal coward. But that was also one of his virtues, for his cowardice served as a brake on a talent that otherwise knew no limits. . . . They say cowards are drawn to betrayal. They are also sometimes drawn to poetry, though that is rarer. But the combination of genius and crime is truly rare, extraordinary; they're "incompatible things." But are they? No one has ever really checked on that.

Seryozha, so precocious, perceptive, and strange, was the first person whom Sinyavsky ever saw mock Stalin. Seryozha thumbed his nose at the portrait of Stalin displayed in the Sinyavsky home, thereby initiating the author into ways of secret rebellion. Indebted to him for this, Sinyavsky is bound to pay him a perverse kind of homage, and he does not stint.

As he delights in Seryozha so does he delight in the avuncular Gletkins who people both the pre-Gulag fiction and *Goodnight!* It is surprising, in fact, how closely the KGB interrogators of "whole cloth" fiction—that is, the ones created before Sinyavsky really experienced them—match up to those he actually came across in Lubyanka and Lefortovo. Compare Comrade O of *The Makepeace Experiment*—with his "innate good nature and . . . the childish, inoffensive smugness of the man of humble origin, grown fat in office"—to Pakhomov in *Goodnight!*, who has a homey, unthreatening manner and a "round and childish face with its plump little wart near the mouth."

The before and after do not correspond entirely, though. There is no one in the pre-Gulag works to match the animal stealth of Lieutenant Kishka, who guards the stifling, shabby rooms of the "public house," where the prisoners, or zeks, were allowed yearly conjugal visits. Sinyavsky spied Kishka squatting—one lustful eye glued to the keyhole—outside a room where a young zek was making love to his wife. Real-life surveillance lacks technological sophistication. In their room next door Sinyavsky and his wife, Mariya, hear Major Postnikov's tape recorder squeaking under the floorboards.

> "Did you hear that? It's a mouse again!" says my wife with a smile, pretending that the tape was a mouse. . . . The reel must be jammed or the tape ran out, or it's not winding right, or it squeaks on the turn. . . . The machine is dying, secondhand, written off, good enough for the likes of us. Still, you can never be entirely sure—maybe it was a mouse. How can you ever know?

That cheerful dash of "open-mindedness," so automatic with Sinyavsky, may or may not be the defense mechanism that got him through the Gulag in the first place. However, its use as a device by which to present the Gulag to us can be wearisome. One wonders if an impregnable attitude of self-conscious irony is the surest guide in finding a way out of the moral maze the author feels himself to be in. One does not want to denigrate Sinyavsky's attempt to weigh—however circuitously and elliptically—his portion of guilty participation in the Stalinist system against his six years in neo-Stalinist purgatory. And his attempt to do so without heavy-handedness is certainly appreciated. But what he risks with his waggish literary approach is making *Goodnight!* into the paradox to end all paradoxes: a companionable book about the Gulag.

St. Urbain revisited

Mordecai Richler Solomon Gursky Was Here. Knopf, 557 pages, $19.95

reviewed by David Gurevich

Many years ago in Moscow, I interpreted for a visiting stage director from Calgary. At the end of her visit she gave me a present, a book titled *Cocksure*, by Mordecai Richler—"a *Canadian* writer," she added importantly.

I will confess right off the bat that, starting with *Cocksure* (1968), Mr. Richler has been one of my favorites through the years. His Canadian-ness has only added to his appeal: American literature seems like an adopted

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home to me, while Canada is still an exotic place.

Mr. Richler has often dealt with Canadian-ness in his work. For him, a sense of national pride is always leavened with a bit of cultural inferiority complex. I can think of no other Canadian writer who is so mordant on the subject. Jake Hersh, the hero of *St. Urbain's Horseman* (1971), tells a story of "a New York publisher who amused himself by drawing up a list of ten books for a new firm that was bound to fail. Leading the list of unreadables was a book titled *Canada, Our Good Neighbor to the North*."

Mr. Richler does not abandon the subject in his latest book, *Solomon Gursky Was Here*. The hero, Moses Berger, recalls his father's friends gathering at the Bergers': "For them, Canada was not yet a country but the next-door place. They were still this side of Jordan, in the land of Moab . . . the Yiddish newspapers they devoured [were] coming out of New York."

One must note, of course, that Mr. Richler is describing a certain milieu—the streets of St. Urbain, St. Catherine, and Jeanne Mance in Montreal's Jewish quarter, whose denizens, the victims of double discrimination from the Quebec French and the WASPs, could not help feeling like second-class citizens and had to look across the border to what seemed like the Kingdom Come of New York's Lower East Side.

It is this neighborhood that has come to be Mr. Richler's Yoknapatawpha. From *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959) to *St. Urbain's Horseman* to *Joshua Then and Now* (1980) and now *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, he has chronicled the rise of his generation, and their flight from cold-water flats on St. Urbain to exclusive Montreal neighborhoods like Outremont and Westmount. He has done it without an iota of piety or parochial pride. Mr. Richler's American counterpart is, of course, Philip Roth.

Messrs. Roth and Richler are equally brilliant, but they differ in tone. Mr. Roth is more juvenile, writhing on the analyst's couch and blaming his Jewish middle-class roots for all his *tsores*. (To be fair, he has, in his later books,

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CADMUS

Enrico
DONATI

Dimitri
HADZI

Edward
HOPPER

Matsumi
KANEMITSU

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started taking some joy in them, too.) Mr. Richler is the more mature social observer—and, perhaps, the more effective. If self-deprecation is the chief characteristic of Jewish humor, then Mr. Richler has reached the apex. No one who has read *St. Urbain's Horseman* can forget Herky Hersh's tour of Europe—mostly of the continent's urinals. In *Gursky*, Mr. Richler displays his marksmanship with even greater panache. He can devastate his target with heavy artillery: for example, the six-page description of Bernard Gursky the liquor tycoon's seventy-fifth birthday banquet, for which the Israeli ambassador is flown from Ottawa on a Gursky jet to make a speech, and where the guests are shown a made-to-order movie about the Gursky dynasty, featuring footage of their good deeds in Israel and voice-over Shakespeare quotations. Or he can pack it in a one-liner. Here Bernard Gursky talks to his assistant about who should write his biography:

> "What about Churchill, who wrote his stuff?"
>
> "He did, Mr. Bernard."
>
> "Oh yeah? . . . Maybe yes and maybe no. Now this Hemingway fella, how much can he earn?"
>
> "He's dead."
>
> "Of course he's dead. You think I don't know? You're getting on my nerves, Harvey. Haven't you any work to do?"

Earlier in the exchange, Bernard remarks, "For this job I don't want a Canadian. I want the best." In another dialogue, a French Quebec official scolds his wife for using French at a Gursky wedding: "Do not talk in the language of the peasantry here. Speak Yiddish." Both these jokes are lethally double-edged; as a humorist, Mr. Richler will never waste a stone on just one bird—not when he can get two.

Pardon me, did I say "humorist"? Well, this is how most people think of Mr. Richler. I find the label unfair and reductive. To Mr. Richler, humor is not the end but the means. Delicious as his putdowns of Jewish bourgeoisie are, his books go beyond mere satire.

Mr. Richler's view of his material has darkened since *Duddy Kravitz*. Duddy was crass and immoral, but his tremendous energy drew the reader in, and his unpleasant side could be rationalized as cultivated in response to his opponents' anti-Semitism. Duddy could be romantic, he could even be in love—not that he would let it get in the way of clinching a deal. In the new book, when the young Bernard Gursky wants to marry the daughter of a pillar of Winnipeg Jewry, his future father-in-law demands assurance that Bernard is the majority stockholder in McTavish Distillers Ltd., the Gursky liquor company. His brother Solomon will not cede his own stock, so Bernard takes out a contract on him; Solomon sends McGraw, his underling, instead; when McGraw gets hit, Bernard tries to frame Solomon for the murder. Call me Pollyanna, but I can't imagine Duddy going that far.

The title, *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, sounds like a concession to the audience: "*Nu*, is it funny?" Indeed it is, but this drama is not played strictly for laughs. Thematically, it is a return to favorite stomping grounds first covered in *St. Urbain's Horseman*. In that book, Jake Hersh, a film director, is obsessed with his cousin Joey, a hustler who was set up by their Uncle Abe, a seemingly respectable businessman. Jake refuses to believe that Joey is dead and gets a notion that Joey is in Paraguay, seeking out Dr. Mengele. In *Gursky*, too, Moses Berger, a sometime scholar and writer, is obsessed with Solomon Gursky, the bootlegger who, with his brothers, founded the Gursky liquor empire. Solomon allegedly died in an air crash in the Thirties, but Moses, unsatisfied with the evidence, doggedly pursues Solomon's trail, coming across his journals, talking to his old associates; he even gets messages that, though unsigned, seem to come from Solomon himself. It seems that, after his disappearance in the Arctic Northwest, Solomon, juggling many identities—Swiss banker Otto Raven, California naturalist Mr. Corbeau, Africana expert Mr. Cuervo—has shown up in the wings at every

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In the increasingly modestly scaled world of modern fiction, a character like this is already a handful. Not for Richler, subdued realism; his crooks are larger-than-life. His incessantly hyperbolizing imagination leads us to Solomon's grandfather Ephraim, from whom Solomon seems to have inherited his recklessness and derring-do. Ephraim, the son of a Liverpool cantor, ran away from home at thirteen to work in the mines. Then, stealing his teacher's candlesticks (shades of Victor Hugo?), he ran off to London, where he ended up in jail for forging papers and pimping off two Irish girls. Finally, he joined Franklin's expedition (using a forged letter of recommendation, naturally) in search of the Northwest Passage, and was its only survivor. He converted Eskimos to his own brand of Judaism, founded a cult and defrauded farmers in Quebec, travelled to Minsk (where his family had come from), ran arms in the American Civil War, sold firewater to Indians, and swindled miners during the Alaskan Gold Rush.

Richler does not believe in half measures: is there a colorful business opportunity that Ephraim missed? an Event that Solomon sat out? a way to shaft neighbor that Bernard did not try? Scenes come down in an avalanche, dialogue follows a page from a script that follows a diary entry, all done in rich, meaty prose, generously peppered with witticisms and cultural allusions high and low—this is not for meek souls. Fortunately for them, Mr. Richler's chronology stops (in reverse) in the 1830s; Berger does not trace the Gursky family tree to the Golem of Prague or the moneylenders of Masada. I kvetch a little: Mr. Richler has done his research, and under his skillful pen, the nineteenth-century London underworld, with its "peelers" (cops) and "bug-hunters" (who work in tandem with hookers, picking johns' pockets), comes vibrantly alive. So do Eskimos, and Quebec farmers, and everybody else.

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The energy level is so high, and the book reads so well, that Mr. Richler's Cecil de Mille-like cast and his incessant jump-cuts in time can produce sheer physical exhaustion in a reader. This is not a book you read placidly for two weeks in twenty-page helpings. You read it till you collapse.

Mr. Richler's narrative style adds to the challenge. The main stories and 1,001 subplots come out in a resolutely non-linear fashion. First, an episode like McGraw's murder is mentioned in a seemingly unrelated narrative; a hundred pages later, it is told from Bernard's perspective; finally, Berger tells it—presumably from Solomon's side. The technique, which applies to nearly every episode in the book, is not quite Rashomonic: we instantly buy Solomon's version, because we already know Bernard to be a king-size scumbag. The plots and subplots come together at the end, but the first hundred pages might baffle the reader.

And then there's Mr. Richler's stand-in, Moses Berger, a wunderkind and a Rhodes scholar. He is a dubious proposition, if only because he is so familiar to the Richler reader—he's Jake Hersh/Joshua updated. This time, en route to finding Solomon, he has terrible bouts with the demons of alcohol; passing out from Macallan whisky seems to be his standard response to every crisis. But his relation to the Gurskys goes beyond his attachment to their product. In Moses's youth, his father, a Jewish poet of note, took a lucrative job as Bernard Gursky's speech writer and was promptly scorned by his friends on the Left. Later, when Moses shows promise as a writer himself, his father to falls into a deep funk as he waits for *The New Yorker* to respond to Moses's submission. This scene, like the brilliant twist on it two hundred pages later, is a gem: never has a father-son literary rivalry been so lethal.

On the surface, as Moses engrosses himself more deeply in Solomon's buccaneering life, he seems to be seeking a hero, an underworld King of the Jews, to whom no trick is too dirty in order to rise in the *goyim*'s world. (Leave Bible-quoting intellectuals to Bellow: for a prototype, Richler will take Bugsy Segal over Delmore Schwartz any time.) Moses is also looking for a father figure, and, compared to a vain Yiddish poet, the flamboyant gangster fills the bill. Never one to be satisfied with a simple human need, Richler cannot resist the temptation to top this already rich cake with biblical icing: Moses has to accomplish what his famous namesake did; he has to see Solomon's face. You don't need to be a Yeshiva *bucher* to get the reference when, at his trial, Solomon solemnly says to the judge, "I am that I am." And then there's the raven—according to Richler, the Eskimo lore's equivalent of the Biblical dove. The raven is Solomon's symbol: "a raven with an unquenchable itch to meddle and provoke things, to play tricks on the world and its creatures." You need an elephant, not a bird, to carry this much symbolic cargo.

Although Canada and the Jews remain Mr. Richler's two leading themes, there are enough Gentiles in *Gursky* to make a separate novel. The most striking of these is Bert Smith, a humble customs official whose parents were led out of their English misery by a Reverend Horn, who sold them to the Canadian Immigration Department with this remarkable speech:

> "Sir, I cannot tell you how it grieves me to see the pristine prairie, the fine British province of Saskatchewan, polluted by dirty, ignorant Slavs in their lice-ridden sheepskin coats, and by the mad followers of Prince Kropotkin and Count Leo Tolstoy, the latter a novelist who celebrates adultery. Why are we welcoming these peasants when stout British yeomen, men of valor who held the thin red line against the Dervishes at Omdurman and marched through the Transvaal with Kitchener, are crying out for land?"

Smith, a puritan redneck, presents a problem for the Gurskys: he will not be bribed. Bernard threatens him, and Solomon reasons with him, all to no avail. Yet if Smith is honest, his superiors in the customs department are not, and the clerk is cashiered

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in dishonor. The moment of truth does come, and Smith is to testify at the trial; but, unlike Dostoevsky's truthtellers, Richler's comes with bad teeth and body odor; he stumbles and stutters, and cannot express himself properly—enough to turn off the snobbish WASP prosecutor. The Smith subplot is not your average humorous fare: it is an achievement unto itself.

I have already cited many examples of Mr. Richler's ruthless social satire of rich Jews. His two best creations here are Harvey Schwartz, Bernard's devoted assistant, who goes as far as to take upon himself His Master's Fart, laid in the presence of snobbish British bankers, and Harvey's literary wife Becky, who is promoted to the pantheon of Canadian letters with the Gursky money. According to Mr. Richler, in the Eighties the Gursky dynasty is more "Dynasty" than Gursky: the Stetson and the yarmulke are interchangeable in the era of leveraged buyouts. And so Lionel, Bernard's son, who outdoes his father in sleaziness, wages stock battle against his Uncle Morrie and his cousin Barney, an equally sleazy would-be producer—until the mysterious Corvus Trust of Zurich (isn't *corvus* Latin for "raven"?) joins the fight.

If this sounds familiar, well, it is today's—any day's—headlines. Besides, did I mention that the Gurskys started out as bootleggers, and their business became the world's largest distiller? "I made the Gurskys up out of my own head," Mr. Richler says in the closing note, but, God, they sound a lot like that Canadian liquor family whose name starts with a *B*—shouldn't go any further, should I?

Whether this is a roman à clef or not—surely Mr. Richler and his publisher availed themselves of legal advice before bringing out the book—the book succeeds stunningly. Its flaws—to some they will seem like virtues—are more than adequately compensated for by its intelligence, sense of humor, and clear-sightedness. With all Solomon's exploits, Mr. Richler never falls for *nostalgie de la boue*; in the final Balzacian twist, we learn that the seed money for the Gurskys' empire was obtained in a seemingly heroic but actually nefarious manner (to tell you more would be to give the story away).

Ultimately, there are no heroes in Mr. Richler's world—there are crooks like Solomon who remain human in spite of their crookedness; there are holy fools like Solomon's son Henry, a gentle amateur ecologist who cast his lot with the Hasidim; there are booze-soaked intellectuals like Moses; there are guilt-ridden media celebs like Moses's childhood friend Sam Burns, *née* Birenbaum; and there are simple souls, like the welfare boozers with whom Moses carouses at The Caboose. But what a wild, funny, full-color world it is (and I haven't told you half of it); what fun it is to ride through it for 557 pages.

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Letters

Raymond Williams

To the Editors:

There is a lack of generosity in Maurice Cowling's "Raymond Williams in Retrospect" (January 1990). It cannot be that everything that Williams wrote is bad and dangerous. Mr. Cowling seems still to be fighting battles now twenty years old. Of the spirit behind the disturbances of the 1960s, many things may be said. But that they were "odious" may, I believe, be said only of those who—themselves well beyond the draft age—committed the bodies of younger men to a war which they had not the courage to go to Congress to get approved, as is required by law. I have heard too often at dinner parties old men discussing, with a certain pleasure, the merits of carpet bombing. War Games, indeed! The odor arising from those conversations far out-stinks the (by comparison) harmless activities of the "revolutionaries" of the 1960s. I am bemused that a conservative journal, such as yours, thus indirectly defends illegal acts by so-called conservatives who managed to avoid the traditional legal restraints by bullying a supine Congress. Even the dullest of imaginations can picture what Burke would have said in such circumstances.

There are enough poorly written journals which, preaching to the converted, prefer revisionism to analysis. It is something to be diligently guarded against.

Gabriel Austin
New York, NY

Maurice Cowling replies:

I have two rather unyielding comments:

1. My polemic was deliberate since Williams is on the way to becoming a secular saint and needs to be de-canonized in advance.

2. There were political and prudential arguments for and against ending American involvement in Vietnam but the student movement of the 1960s was not in this sense either political, prudential, or constitutional. On the contrary, it was a moralistic protest against the force which every great power from time to time finds itself obliged to use if it is to maintain its nerve and fulfill its responsibilities.

"Bingo!" at the Wadsworth Atheneum

To the Editors:

The New Criterion's misguided ideas about Patrick McCaughey, which appeared in "Notes & Comments" for December 1989, are based on an inaccurately reported interview that Mr. McCaughey had with William Zimmer of *The New York Times* and that was published in the *Times* last October 8.

Mr. Zimmer's interview contained many mistakes, and one glaring misquote, namely, "After Mr. Austin's Directorate, the Wadsworth Atheneum fell into a decline." Mr. McCaughey said no such thing. He has repeatedly and publicly acknowledged Mr. Cunningham's, Mr. Elliot's, and Mr. Atkinson's achievements on many occasions. Before *The New Criterion* sounded off in such a manner, it might have been wise to call

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Mr. McCaughey for clarification, for it is well known that the Wadsworth Atheneum has never been "in decline" in the 147 years of its history.

The New Criterion's attack on Mr. McCaughey's and his curators' decision to take the Mapplethorpe show—which was made long before the Corcoran controversy—and its implication that this decision was made for publicity reasons, is totally unfair. What Mr. McCaughey meant when he supposedly exclaimed "Bingo!" was that the publicity that had previously surrounded this show might make the general public more aware of the exhibition; that many of this public might come to the Atheneum to see the exhibition for themselves; and many who came would then remain in the museum and discover what a marvelous place it is. Furthermore, Mr. McCaughey's judgments about the merits of Mapplethorpe's work are more in the mainstream than *The New Criterion*'s. To "raise questions about Mr. McCaughey's judgments in artistic matters and thus about his competence as the director of a serious art museum" is not the sort of criticism we would have expected to find in this journal. *The New Criterion* says that Mr. McCaughey has a provincial mind, and yet I wonder if it thinks that Sam Wagstaff [former Curator of Paintings, Prints, and Drawings at the Wadsworth Atheneum and a major collector of photography] had a provincial mind, or that Tom Armstrong, who staged a huge Mapplethorpe exhibition at the Whitney two years ago, has a provincial mind.

We have followed the progress of the Wadsworth Atheneum ever since our fathers were directors, and we are well-informed about its activities and staff, including the current director, his extensive and impressive background, his vast knowledge of art history, his past experience as a museum professional, and his personal integrity. You don't get to be Visiting Professor of Art History at Harvard University, found a university art department, or publish two books (one of them at Oxford University Press) and numerous scholarly articles if you are a mere provincial mind.

Naturally one can disagree about the merits of an artist, but making insulting remarks about a person who disagrees with you is not the most professional way for the editors of a critical journal to behave. But as in politics and other areas of American life, insults, personal attacks, and inaccurate statements have become the norm. We would have expected more from a journal of *The New Criterion*'s caliber.

Priscilla Cunningham
Hampton Bays, NY

Sarah G. Austin
New York, NY

The Editors reply:

The New Criterion has checked with the editor of the Sunday Connecticut section of *The New York Times* and with William Zimmer, who wrote the interview with Mr. McCaughey from which *The New Criterion* quoted in its December "Notes & Comments" department, and both report the same thing: No complaint was received from either Mr. McCaughey or the Wadsworth Atheneum about alleged inaccuracies in Mr. Zimmer's article. Indeed, it is Mr. Zimmer's impression that his article was favorably received at the Atheneum. But even if it wasn't, both the museum and its director have remained silent about their complaints. We therefore cannot credit the belated claims of Priscilla Cunningham and Sarah G. Austin in this regard.

We can well imagine that it would come as a shock to the writers of this letter to learn that even people who have been invited to Harvard and have had books published by Oxford University Press are not beyond criticism when it comes to judging their quality of mind, the nature of their taste, or their qualifications for directing the affairs of a first-rate museum. It must be wonderful to live in a world where these once magical names—Harvard! Oxford!—evoke achievements beyond dispute, but the bad news is that such a world no longer exists. We regret that we must be the first to break the news of this sad development to Priscilla Cunningham and Sarah G. Austin.

About the late Sam Wagstaff, there is much to be said, but here we shall limit ourselves to two brief comments. Firstly, Mr. Wagstaff was indeed a connoisseur of art and photography who rightly earned the admiration of his peers. Priscilla Cunningham and Sarah G. Austin may be surprised to learn that Mr. Wagstaff had a high enough opinion of the critical views of Hilton

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Kramer to invite him to collaborate on a book about his (Mr. Wagstaff's) photography collection. That work on the book had to be discontinued had much more to do with Mr. Wagstaff's well-known drug addiction, which made coherent progress on such a work impossible, than with any disagreements about artistic matters. Secondly, about Sam Wagstaff's relation to Robert Mapplethorpe, surely Priscilla Cunningham and Sarah Austin know that it is not to be explained solely in terms of artistic judgment.

Much could be said, too, about the mind of Tom Armstrong, but we shall forego the pleasure of pursuing the subject on the present occasion.

Finally, there is the matter of "insulting remarks." Here are Priscilla Cunningham and Sarah G. Austin attempting to malign the work of William Zimmer, *The New York Times*, *The New Criterion* and its editor, and all on the basis not of sound information but of a misplaced loyalty to the director of a museum they obviously love. It is our opinion that they are not in a position to hand down lessons in ethics, journalistic or otherwise, to anyone.

Marsden Hartley

To the Editors:

For a catalogue raisonné of the paintings and drawings of Marsden Hartley, I would appreciate hearing from anyone who owns or knows of paintings or drawings by the artist. I am also interested in unpublished letters, essays, and poems.

Gail Levin
c/o Salander-O'Reilly Galleries
22 East Eightieth Street
New York, NY 10021

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

"Photography Until Now" *by Hilton Kramer*
The Pasternak celebrations in Moscow *by William Jay Smith*
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Publication

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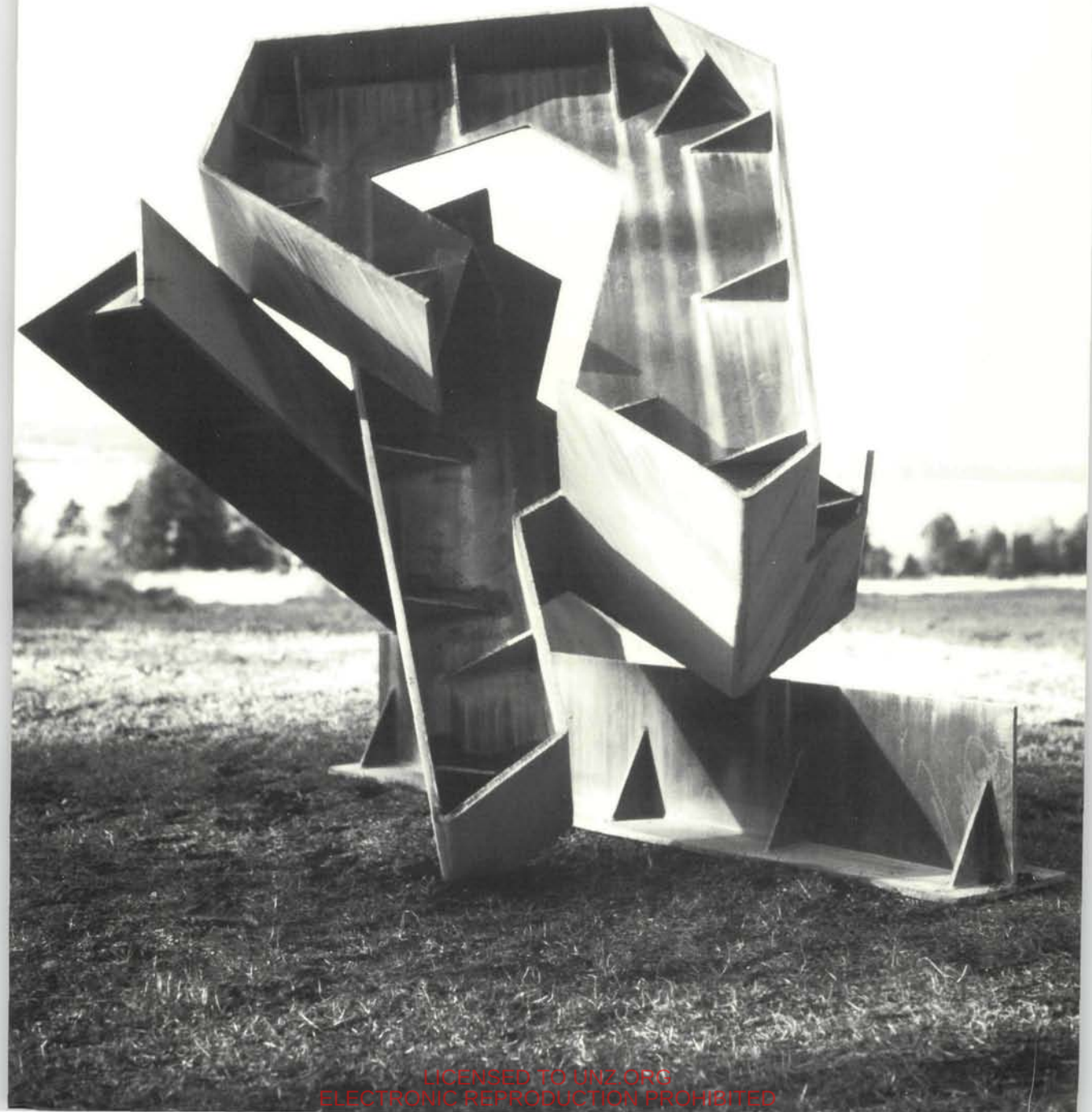

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